

MAKE A SHIELD FROM WISDOM

Selected Verses from Nāṣir-i Khusraw's *Dīwān*



Translated and Introduced by
ANNEMARIE
SCHIMMEL

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I.B.Tauris

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in association with

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Introduction

‘Originality, learning, sincerity, enthusiastic faith, fearlessness, contempt for time servers and flatterers, and courage hardly to be found, so far as I know, in any other Persian poet’ – these are the qualities of Nāṣir-i Khusraw according to the great British orientalist E.G. Browne, whose deep study of ‘one of the most remarkable men of this epoch’ made him hope to write a biography of the Persian poet-philosopher – a hope which, alas! was never fulfilled. Even despite the penetrating studies of W. Ivanow and Henry Corbin, nobody (except Mehdi Mohaghegh) has tried a full evaluation of Nāṣir-i Khusraw’s comprehensive collection of poetry, his *Dīvān*, which has been edited several times.

The work of the Persian author in both its philosophical and poetical aspects has been known in the West for more than a century. Around 1880, one observes an increasing interest in his writings: Hermann Ethé’s edition and German verse translation of the *Rawshanā’r-nāma* in the *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 1879 and 1880 should be mentioned as the first major attempt to understand Nāṣir-i Khusraw; this study was followed by E. Fagnan’s translation of the *Sa’ādatnāma*, again in 1880 in the same scholarly German journal. Ethé himself published some translations of *qaṣīdas* in the year 1882.

At that point, C. Schefer’s edition of Nāṣir-i Khusraw’s *Safarnāma*, his travelogue, had just appeared; in his French introduction Schefer gave a good survey of the history of the author’s biography in the Persian literary tradition so that the *Safarnāma* remained an important introduction to medieval descriptive prose literature for many European students of Persian. Its recent English translation by Wheeler M. Thackston makes the important, informative text available to the English-speaking public.

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As for Nāṣir's central role as scholar and philosopher in the Ismaili tradition, it has been lucidly shown in the edition of his late prose work, *Jāmi 'al-ḥikmatayn*, by Henry Corbin and Mohammad Moin, recently translated into French by Isabelle de Gastines.

Nāṣir-i Khusraw's name was quite well known to the historiographers of medieval and modern Iran, although his personality is often shrouded in myths. The first reliable account occurs in Rashīduddīn's *World History* who even mentions that Nāṣir might have been instrumental in converting Ḥasan-i Sabbāḥ to Ismailism, and some of his verses are mentioned in works like Ḥamdullāh Mustawfī's *Tārīkh-i guzīda*, Dawlatshāh's *Tadhkirat* and Khwandamir's *Ḥabīb as-siyar*, as well as in the strange survey of religions from the late seventeenth century, the *Dabistān-i madhāhib*. But the three 'heretical' verses usually ascribed to him are not found, as E.G. Browne pointed out, in the Tabriz edition of the *Dīvān*. Jāmī has cited him in his *Bahāristān*, and in later times Luṭf 'Alī Beg mentioned the poet-philosopher's alleged autobiography in his *Ātashkada*.

For Nāṣir-i Khusraw was soon surrounded by legends and strange tales. His pseudo-autobiography, frequently quoted by later authors, consists of a patchwork of popular tales, often from the fairy-tale genre, as E.G. Browne has shown in his article in the journal of the *Royal Asiatic Society* 1905. A particularly interesting tale about our poet-philosopher is found in Dawlatshāh's *Tadhkirat* (pp. 69 ff.) which contains some correct and some – rather, many – incorrect statements. He writes:

Nāṣir-i Khusraw came originally from Isfahan. Some say he was a monotheist and gnostic; some blame him claiming that he was a nature philosopher and atheist, *dahrī*, and believed in metempsychosis. And God knows best. In any case, he was a philosopher, *ḥakīm*, and an accomplished man and an ascetic. He took the penname *Hujjat*, 'Proof' because he had a firm proof and strong point in discussions with scholars and philosophers.

He first came from Isfahan to Gilan and Mazandaran and disputed there for a while with the scholars; they persecuted him and he fled toward Khorasan. While he was on his way to Khorasan he was honoured by the company of the *shaykh al-mashā'ikh*, Abū'l-Ḥasan-i Kharāqānī. The shaykh learned about his state by means of miracles and said to his companions: 'Tomorrow a *ḥujjatī* (proof-minded) man in this and that form and quality will reach the Khānqāh; honour him and show respect to him! When he

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wants a dispute in external sciences tell him: “Our master is an illiterate villager!” and bring him before me!”

Indeed, he came, and after greeting the master, Kharaqāni addressed him, according to Dawlatshāh:

‘O you simplehearted poor thing! How can you keep company, *ṣoḥbat*, with me as for years you were a prisoner of the deficient soul, *nafs*, while I have fastened three *ṭalāq* (divorce) on the corners of the *chādūr* of this thing full of ruses (i.e., the *nafs*) on the very first day I set my foot on the stepping stone of true men!’

Nāṣir-i Khusraw, thus the story goes, defended intellect as the first thing God created, while Kharaqāni told him that this is valid only for the intellect of the prophets while normal human intellect is deficient. As a proof of Nāṣir’s wrong attitude he recited the beginning of a *qaṣīda* which the philosopher had composed the previous night:

High in the seven stalactite domes there are two jewels,
both higher than the universe and what is in it.

Nāṣir, understandably, was vexed by the spiritual insight of the shaykh who reminded him that the noblest thing is not Reason, but Love, *‘ishq*. He stayed with him for some time; then he turned to Khorasan. But the highest Qadi of Khorasan, Abū Suhayl Sa‘lūkī, warned the philosopher:

‘You are an accomplished and great man, but as you make many investigations and examinations and your word becomes more and more famous it looks to me that the external scholars of Khorasan will wage war against you. It would be better for you to choose to leave here.’

The Hakīm went away from Nishapur and came to Balkh and was there, withdrawn, until he finally reached the mountainous area of Badakhshan.

Dawlatshāh quotes a *qaṣīda* against the Khorasanis (see below, p. 6) and tells his readers that Nāṣir-i Khusraw’s *Divān* consists of 30,000 verses and is ‘a collection of words of wisdom, and preaching and firm and well established words’ and that he also ‘composed the *Rawshanā’r-nāma* and the *Kanz al-ḥaqā’iq* in prose.’ This is correct, but the author’s following statement, although in keeping with the alleged relation between Nāṣir and Kharaqāni, who died in 1034, is wrong:

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Nāṣir-i Khusraw appeared in the days of Maḥmūd of Ghazna, and he was a contemporary of Abū 'Alī Ibn Sīnā, and it is said that the two kept company, but this is what people say, and I have not seen it in any historical work or manuscript.

The noble grave of Ḥakīm Nāṣir-i Khusraw is in the valley of Yumgān in the province of Badakhshān, and the people of the mountains intensely believe in Nāṣir-i Khusraw. Some wrote about him as Sultan, some as Shāh, some as Amīr, and some say that he was a *sayyid*. They tell, among other things, that at sundry times he is sitting on the arch of the mountain and has stayed alive from the smell of food. That is folkish talk which is not worth anything. I asked this from the martyred Shāh Sulṭān Muḥammad Badakhshī, and he said that it has no foundation. The Ḥakīm died in 431.

Dawlatshāh's account is interesting because it probably reflects the general ideas about the strange philosopher-poet, and the story about the reason for his 'exile' in Yumgān is correct, for contemporaries, later generations and even some modern European scholars such as Jan Rypka (who follows Russian orientalists) have seen in him 'a freethinker, even a heretic'.

To correct his account, Dawlatshāh would have needed to cast a glance at Nāṣir-i Khusraw's long 'confessional' ode which tells of his birth date and his spiritual adventures (see below, p. 46 f.) and which can be complemented by numerous allusions from his verse. He speaks time and again of his literary achievements, his learning, and his unceasing struggle against the representatives of various religious currents, be they Sunnis of this or that legal school or even Shias of the Twelver-Shia persuasion, and yet there are still many questions open. What is the true story of his youth, of his original occupation? How did he spend his last fifteen or more years in the exile at 'the end of the world', Yumgān?

The outward political and religious events of the first half of the eleventh century were the canvas on which Nāṣir-i Khusraw's poetry and prose developed – a quite astonishing kind of poetry indeed. As for his 'external' life, one date can be established beyond doubt. That is the date of his birth. Abū Mu 'īnaddīn Nāṣir son of Khusraw al-Qūbādiyānī al-Marwāzī – his full name – mentions several times the year 394 of the *hegira* as the year of his birth, and specifies it by adding the month,

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Dhu'l-qa'da, which corresponds to September 1004. His birthplace Qūbādiyān was situated in the district of Merv, but he seems to have spent a long time in Balkh, for in one of his *qaṣīdas* he addresses the morning breeze to tell the tale of his sad life to his house:

O morning breeze! when you pass by the area of Balkh,
pass by my house, and tell my story there!

He was well educated in the arts and sciences necessary for a young man from good family, but apparently had no formal education in Islamic sciences. He seems to have served at some of the courts, but certainly not at Ghazna, then capital of the Ghaznavid empire. He may have worked with Chaghri Beg Dā'ūd, a Seljuk prince whose name occurs in the *Safarnāma*, and, as Jan Rypka suggests, perhaps with 'Alī ibn Asad of Badakhshān, an Ismaili. That would have facilitated his later life in the mountains. The Seljukids, on the other hand, were staunch defenders of Sunni Islam and, more exactly, of Ash'arite theology, for whose propagation the able vizier Niẓāmūlmulk was later to found a number of *madrassa*, theological colleges, in various parts of the empire. The most renowned one was the Niẓāmiyya in Baghdad where the great Abū Hāmid al-Ghazzālī taught, who composed, among other works, a sharp refutation of the Ismailis, called the *Bāṭinīs*, 'the people of esoteric meaning'. And some two decades after Nāṣir-i Khusraw's death Niẓāmūlmulk fell victim to an assassin.

Nāṣir-i Khusraw was, as he repeatedly tells in his verse, highly respected for his perfect command over the language. This mastery is borne out by his *Dīvān*. Even though E.G. Browne praises him for his style which is, as he claims, so different from the mere rhetorical proficiency of the usual *qaṣīda* writers, yet his mastery of every possible rhetorical device as well as his skill in using most complicated metres is evident in each of his *qaṣīdas* (see below, p. 13ff. But as he himself claims, his earlier poetry was all too frivolous and he destroyed it after his conversion. He frankly admits that he used to love good company and a glass of wine, for this, he writes in his *Travelogue*, was 'the only thing to lessen the sorrow of the world'. But in his later poetry he mercilessly attacks everything that smacks of music, light verse, or pleasure.

After reaching the age of forty, Nāṣir's life changed. Not only in proverb is forty the age when man reaches true wisdom but conversions or

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new turns of life indeed can often be observed at about that age. Setting out on official business to Merv-i Rūd, Nāṣir reached that place during 'a conjunction of Jupiter and the lunar node', which is supposed to be a most fortunate constellation, and prayed for 'true wealth'. Slightly later, in the city of Jūzjānān, he had a dream in which he was called to follow the right path and, awakening from the 'sleep of heedlessness', he chose a new way of life, embarking on the path that leads to true insight and faith.

Returning to Merv, he took leave from his patron, paid off his debts, and left in December 1045 for a long journey. His invaluable *Safarnāma* enumerates the stations through which he passed, fortresses and great mosques: from Merv the road led to Nishāpūr, Qazvīn and Tabrīz. There he arrived in the summer of 1046 and met the panegyrist Qaṭrān, noted for his extremely artificial verse, but, as the traveller remarks, 'he could not speak Persian well', which may just express the difference between the Azarbaijani and the Khorasani style. Turning to what is now Turkey Nāṣir visited Van, Bitlis and Diyarbekir – cities which deeply impressed him – and then turned to Aleppo. In the small Syrian town of Ma'arra he learned about one of the most famous poets of his time (and one can say, in the whole history of Arabic literature). That was the blind, ascetic and pessimistic Abū'l A'lā' al-Ma'arri (d. 1057) whose verses are replete with difficulties and whose sceptical world view and acid irony make him an exceptional writer in Arabic literary history. Generous as he was toward his compatriots, yet he was accused of having composed a book that was intended as a parody of the Qur'an, the *Kitāb al fuṣūl wa'l-ghāyāt*. Often he was considered a freethinker, and indeed never fitted into the patterns prescribed for an orthodox Muslim. Sometimes one seems to sense a certain influence of Ma'arri's critical assessment of the world and its Oh! so unpleasant inhabitants in Nāṣir-i Khusraw's verse, but that may be simply an accidental resemblance.

From Ma'arra the traveller took the route to Ḥamā, Tripoli and Beirut, then to Haifa and Jerusalem. From Jerusalem, where he greatly admired the Dome of the Rock, he set out for the pilgrimage to Mecca in 1047 (later, he was to repeat the pilgrimage several more times). Via Jerusalem he then travelled to Egypt to reach Cairo on 3 August 1047. Cairo, the centre of the Fatimid caliphate, seemed to him a veritable Paradise, and he stayed there for two or three years.

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The Fatimids, coming from North Africa, had established themselves in Egypt in 969. As their name suggests, they claimed descent from Fātima, the Prophet's daughter, and her husband 'Alī. Like a number of other Shia groups they did not continue the line of the God-guided imams, the descendants of 'Alī and Fātima, to the twelfth one, but were convinced of the legitimacy of Ismā'īl, the eldest son of Ja'far aṣ-Ṣādiq, who appears to have died before AD 765, although Ismaili sources deny that he died during his father's lifetime. Such 'Ismaili' or Sevener-Shia groups emerged in the eighth and ninth centuries in various parts of the Islamic world as far apart as Bahrain, North Africa and Multan (southern Punjab), and it is remarkable that during those decades Shiite groups generally were politically more prominent than the Sunnites. For not only were different groups of Ismailis active in small pockets in various areas, but in 945 the Shiite family of the Daylamite Buwayhids assumed the factual power in Iraq and Iran, keeping the weak Abbasid ruler under their 'protection'. Likewise, the Ḥamdanid court in Aleppo, a centre of Arabic literature, was Shia, and another branch of Shiism, the Fiver or Zaydites, had established their rule in the mountains of Yemen. The Fatimids finally wrested Egypt from the Ikhshidids, the semi-independent viceroys of the Abbasids, and founded the city of Cairo, whose very name, *al-Qāhira al-Mu'izziyya*, 'the Vanquishing (City) of Mu'izz', points to its importance. Al-Mu'izz, the first Fatimid caliph of Egypt, set up a strong rule, and soon the famous al-Azhar, mosque and theological school, was founded to grow into one of the most important universities in the Middle East. It was converted into a Sunni theological school two centuries later, after the Fatimid rule had been replaced, in 1171, by the Sunnite Ayyubids.

It was a time of variegated cultural activities, of building and of learning, and although the reign of the caliph al-Ḥākīm, who mysteriously disappeared in 1021 to become the leading figure in Druze mythology, was controversial, yet, during most of the Fatimid period Egypt enjoyed comparative peace and prosperity, quite contrary to the Eastern lands of the caliphate where rulers of Iranian and Turanian background fought constantly among themselves in the hope of gaining control over parts of the vast empire that stretched from Central Asia to what is now Pakistan.

At the time when Nāṣir-i Khusraw reached Cairo the caliph was al-Mustanṣir, whose rule lasted for more than half a century (1035-1094) and

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whose name often appears in Nāṣir's verse. Dazzled by the civilization and the wide range of facilities in Fatimid Egypt the visitor from the East became more deeply steeped in the Ismaili world view. But it is still an open question whether or not he belonged to the Ismailis before he set out from Merv. It seems likely that he was a member of the Ismaili Shia for their ideas were apparently quite well known in eastern Iran, where some thinkers were inclined to espouse a somewhat more esoteric version of Islam rather than the more rigid forms of exoteric faith. The 'repentance' of 1045 would then, perhaps, mean his entering the Ismaili path. W. Ivanow, whose reasoning Jan Rypka follows, thinks that in all probability one can understand Nāṣir's journey to the Fatimid court as an expression of his wish to further his knowledge of Ismailism and see in full glory members of his community, which was usually disliked and even persecuted in Seljukid realms and in the Punjab. His strangely arranged itinerary through Iran, Anatolia and Syria can possibly be interpreted, with Wheeler M. Thackston, as an attempt to visit mainly places where Ismailis were found. The *Safarnāma* itself, however, gives no indication of the author's religious creed or of any sectarian ideas.

In any case, Nāṣir's visit to Cairo proved essential for his further life, especially as he received there the status of *ḥujjat*, the fourth degree in the Ismaili hierarchy in descending order from *nātiq*. That would probably not have been the case if he had been a recent convert. The poet then uses the title *Ḥujjat*, 'Proof', as his pen-name in many of his poems. One wonders whether or not to agree with Rypka's sceptical view that, in the capacity of *ḥujjat* 'he would not have spent his time in such a forgotten place as Yumgān.'

Seven years had passed when the traveller returned to Khorasan in 1052. There, he began to preach ardently – so ardently that he was finally banned from Balkh and found a refuge in Yumgān in Badakhshān, the mountainous region of north-eastern Afghanistan close to Chitral (now Pakistan). There he spent his last fifteen to twenty years. The date of his death is unknown; he must have died after 1072, perhaps in 1088.

Understandably, the lively, active Nāṣir-i Khusraw complains in his poems of the loneliness of Yumgān, his 'prison' (see pp. 26, 42), and one wonders how he may have lived there: who looked after his needs, or listened to his words of wisdom – possibly with the exception of the Amir of Badakhshān. Did he stay in touch with the Fatimid court? Were there

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secret connections with other Ismaili groups in the mountains of the Karakorum range, or in the plains of the Indus, or in eastern Iran? Nothing is known about these facts or possibilities.

But legend has surrounded him with strange miracles: Qazvīnī tells in his *Āthār al-bilād*, written about 1276 (that is some two hundred years after the thinker's death) that Nāṣir had been the king of Balkh, driven out by his subjects, and that he took refuge in Yumgān, which he adorned with wonderful baths, gardens and talismanic figures 'whereon none might gaze without fear of losing his reason'. Nothing could be farther from the truth – unless we interpret the story esoterically. For the lonely thinker had created for himself a world of spiritual power, a world in which he wrote his poems and his philosophical attempt to prove 'The harmony of Greek philosophy and Ismaili theology', that is, his *Jāmi' al-ḥikmatayn*, which he composed in 1070 at the request of the Amir of Badakhshān in order to explain to him a philosophical *qaṣīda* by Abū'l-Haytham.

He also wrote other books. The *Rawshanā' ināma*, a comparatively early mathnaai, was already mentioned; further the *Zād al-musāfirīn*, 'The Nourishment of the Wayfarers' (written in 1053, that is, just after his return from Cairo) and *Vajh-i dīn*, 'The Face of Religion', a philosophical prose work. The fact that the two latter books were among the few Persian and Urdu books printed in Berlin at the Kaviyani Press shortly after the First World War shows that they apparently belonged to that part of the Persian literary heritage which was particularly dear to the Persian intellectuals who had emigrated to Germany in the early 1920s.

Beside these prose works the lonely Nāṣir-i Khusraw wrote poetry – not poetry in praise of princes or grandees, or verses to gain worldly reward and precious robes; rather it is poetry that teaches the importance of wisdom, of reason, of the right word and the right faith. It is remarkable how strong the poet's aversion is against those 'who do not understand', and the numerous verses in which he associates his listeners with animals seem to be inspired by the Qur'anic words against those who 'are like animals, nay, even more astray' (Sura 7/169) – that was also a favourite word of the Sufis when they sang of the ideal 'man', the true 'man of God'. And thus Nāṣir, in his defence of the God-given law and his attack against those who do not heed its prohibitions writes:

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If the *sharī'a* is for all these people
a heavy burden,
it is all right, for donkeys carry burdens,
and they are donkeys.
One puts on them a burden, after all,
and not a saddle,
for in the eyes of God they are much worse
than any donkey! (147)

Nāṣir-i Khusraw's poetry is very interesting first because of its contents, which deserve a full, extensive treatment – a treatment that is not intended in this context. For it may well be possible to find in his verses, as Hans Heinrich Schaeder once remarked of the *Zād al-musāfirīn*, 'a compendium of ideas known from the Epistles of the Brethren of Purity' (*Ikhwān aṣ-Ṣafā*), whose vast encyclopedia is one of the most important medieval surveys of Shiite-Ismaili thought.

Second, Nāṣir's poetry is remarkable from the purely formal viewpoint. It is amazing that a poet in the middle of the eleventh century should have possessed such an enormous technical skill, sometimes foreshadowing the artistic religious *qaṣīdas* by Sanā'ī, sometimes even verses by Khāqāni. His vocabulary contains interesting archaisms and is therefore at times hard to understand, and even more difficult to render correctly. Yet, E.G. Browne, after surveying the entire history of classical Persian literature, was of the opinion that it might perhaps be possible to render some verses of Ḥāfiz, Sa'dī, Firdawsī, Jāmī and Niẓāmi into a Western language, but 'I am bound to admit that there are comparatively few, beyond the five or six mentioned ... whose poems, save in exceptional instances, could be rendered popular in Europe, even by the most skilful translator. One of these few, as I believe, is the poet about whom I am now about to speak.' That is, Nāṣir-i Khusraw.

To understand the learned British orientalist's view we have first to ask ourselves: where does Nāṣir-i Khusraw stand in the history of Persian poetry and, in particular, in the development of the *qaṣīda*? What is his technique, and how do rhetorical skill and intense religious sentiments support each other?

I

Nāṣir-i Khusraw as a poet

Persian poetry began to bloom in the tenth century after the literati of Iran had expressed themselves during the first centuries after the Muslim conquest (that is, after 651) in Arabic, the language of the Qur'an and of learning. Arabic poetry had flourished already in pre-Islamic times, and Persian scholars were among the first to study the complex rules of Arabic grammar and prosody. Taking over Arabic metrical rules (quantitative metres) and forms (the monorhyme) Persians soon learned to apply them to their own language despite the enormous semantic differences between Arabic, a Semitic language, and Persian, part of the Indo-European family. The first truly great name in the history of neo Persian literature is that of Rūdakī (d. 940) at the Samanid court of Bukhara. The decisive development, then, is connected with the name of Maḥmūd of Ghazna (ruled 999–1030), the impetuous ruler of Turkish descent thanks to whose exploits north-western India became part and parcel of the Muslim empire. Firdawsī (d. 1020), in whose *Shāhnāma* the heroic past of Iran and the perpetual struggle between Iran and Turan is immortalized, is the best known author at Maḥmūd's court, and his epic is mentioned by Nāṣir-i Khusraw, with its heroes serving him as examples for the ephemeral character of worldly glory. But numerous other poets too adorned the court of Ghazna. Among them was 'Unṣurī, mentioned by Nāṣir; he was a good author of panegyrics for his royal patron, but more important was his younger colleague Farrukhī (d. 1037), whose colourful, elegant *qaṣīdas* are loved in Iran to this day. The form of *qaṣīda* was known in pre-Islamic Arabic poetry; in fact, some early Arabic *qaṣīdas*, the so-called *Mu'allaqāt*, are regarded as the unsurpassed masterpieces of the

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Arabic language. Many features of this genre were taken over by the Persians when they began to use their own language as a vehicle for poetry, for it was well suited for panegyrics – and most Persian poets served at courts or attached themselves to wealthy patrons in the hope of some monetary reward, often changing their allegiances during their career.

The *qaşîda* usually begins with a romantic part, often with descriptions of spring or autumn; sometimes (especially in classical Arabic) the poet reminisces about a lost love, but even more frequently – at least in Persian – he dwells upon a colourful description of nature which then leads, in an ingenious turn, to the praise of his patron or, in other cases, to a satire against the patron's enemies. After a kind of summary the poet, who likes to introduce his pen-name in the last verse of his work as a kind of signature, asks for some reward. That is at least true for the court poets whom Nāşir (and with him E.G. Browne) despises so intensely. *Hûsn-i t'alab*, the 'elegant way of requesting', is as important as *hûsn-i ma'tla'*, the elegant way of opening the poem with a meaningful sentence which, at its best, strikes the tune which the poet is going to pursue, similar to the solo introduction for a piece of Oriental music.

The monorhyme pattern is expanded: not only the last consonant of the *bayt*, that is the verse consisting of two hemistichs, forms the rhyme as it does in Arabic, but rather a syllable, a whole word or even a sentence that follows the actual rhyming letter serves as rhyme and over-rhyme, *radîf*. By the skilful application of the *radîf* the poet can create an emphasis on a theme that is particularly dear to him (see the *qaşîda* with the *radîf* Muḥammad, p. 59).

The poem is strictly organized, and no deviation from the once chosen metre is permitted; the rhetorical devices and different types of images follow exact rules. That requires, in translation, adherence to established formal conventions, which may seem outdated to a modern Westerner but are as important for the effect of the poem as are the contents. To be sure, the rigid formal exigencies often force the poet to invent strange turns of sentences or use unexpected rare rhyme words. As the language used in the *qaşîda* is colourful and prone to hyperbolic expression, there is no limit to the flight of the writer's fancy, and the more exotic his comparisons the more was the artist admired. For this reason, the art of *qaşîda* writing could easily degenerate into a shallow display of mere

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rhetoric, as is the case with numerous minor poets. In the hand of great masters, however, the reader enjoys the combination of erudition, witty puns and true poetical feeling.

That is certainly the case with many of Nāṣir-i Khusraw's *qaṣīdas*, even though a modern Indian critic, Shiblī Nu'mānī (d. 194) found a lack of 'poetical' feeling in Nāṣir's verse. But even a reader not acquainted with philosophy or more or less obscure allusions to Ismaili doctrines, or who becomes weary of didactic verse and constant complaints about the treacherous world will certainly enjoy many of Nāṣir's verses, be it the author's powerful description of nature in the beginning of many of his grand poems, be it the sharp, poignant verses in which he teaches his contemporaries wisdom and instructs them in the true faith.

E.G. Browne has praised Nāṣir because he does not indulge in empty rhetorical plays as do the court poets who cover their lack of true thoughts with brilliant verbal plays. Yet, the *Dīvān* contains a remarkable amount of rhetorical devices, as Nāṣir had practised the art of poetry for many many years. A careful investigation of his rhythmical patterns is still a desideratum (as it is for many Persian poets!), but even from a quick survey his predilection for metres with a long first syllable becomes clear. Often, rather 'hard' metres are used to add to the weight of the contents; many of them do not allow for a caesura in the middle of the hemistich, while Mawlānā Rūmī, for example, prefers just such 'dancing' rhythms. Lyrical metres such as *mujtathth* with its swinging lilt are presented comparatively rarely. The epic and didactic *mutaqārib*, on the other hand, occurs rather often as it offers itself well to the telling of stories. Some very long *qaṣīdas* are written in *hazaj muthamman*, that is, the single hemistich consists of sixteen syllables, four of which (at the beginning of each foot) are short. Due to the length of the hemistich, the poet could easily elaborate and expand his thought.

The same skill with which Nāṣir-i Khusraw chose metres that are fitting for his serious thoughts is displayed in his rhyming technique. He does not shun the use of the most difficult rhymes such as *-ang* or *-aq* which are then filled with unusual and unexpected allusions and comparisons. The presence of some old eastern Persian expressions makes it sometimes hard to do full justice to his linguistic skills. Nāṣir knows how to highlight his feelings by the clever use of the *radīf* – be it the name of Muḥammad or that of 'Alī; or a long *qaṣīda* (575–8) in which he attacks

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the enemy of 'Alī by addressing him with the deprecating term *Ya nāṣibi* through 37 verses.

The form of *su'āl u javāb*, question and answer, is applied in a lively dialogue ('I said – he said') that extends over 54 verses, and one also reads chains of anaphors to stress a specific aspect of his thought. In many verses one finds the form called *radd al-'ujz 'alā'š-šadr*, that is, to close the second hemistich with the same word as occurs at the beginning of the first hemistich. In such cases, he likes to use *tajnīs*, the repetition of the same word in a different meaning. A good example of an 'enlarged *tajnīs*' is his verse:

Time is a falcon, *bāz*, very predatory –
How can you play, *bāzī*, with the falcon, *bāz*, of Time? (589)

Puns on the double meaning of *shām*, 'evening' and *Shām*, 'Syria' occur several times. Thus he claims that the greedy person is at the midmorning meal, *chāshht*, in Chāch (near present Tashkent) and in the evening, *shām*, in Syria, *Shām* (511; cf. p. 64).

In one of Nāṣir's lines a pun is used that was to become a favourite with Sufi poets. That is the play with *baqā*, 'remaining, eternal duration' and *qabā*, 'cloak': as our lodgement, the world, has no duration, *baqā*, it really does not matter whether one's back is covered by a cloak, *qabā* (120); that is, outward wealth and pomp is of no interest to the true believer. The contrasting pair of black and white, night and day occurs in Nāṣir's verse as frequently as in Persian poetry in general:

Day and night passed over me,
and their changes changed me too:
Like the day looks now my hair,
and my day looks like the night. (62)

He uses colourful images to sing impressively of his miserable state. They may be taken from the realm of calligraphy: not only his stature, once straight like an *alif* turns into a crescent-shaped *nūn*; nay even true humanity, manly virtue, has now undergone the same humiliating process (150). The *alif*, he says – with a comparison common to all poets whose languages were written in Arabic letters – the *alif* turns into the crooked *dāl* or even into the equally crooked *dhāl*, the first letter of *dhull*, 'lowliness, ignominy'.

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Drowned by the water of his eyelids and burned by the fire of his heart the poor poet, emaciated, laments (337, 341). Even in the gardens he sees negative features: the *sausan*, 'lily', appears rarely in his garden poetry; but with a *tajnis nāqis*, later used by a number of poets, he tells his reader that the lily, *sausan*, of this world, though fragrant, yet should be regarded as a needle, *sūzan* (108). (Later poets would claim, in a more romantic mood, that the lily thus can stitch its own pretty dress, while the treacherous aspect of beauty is, as so often, underlined by Nāṣir-i Khusraw.)

Like the Sufis, Nāṣir too knows that outward appearance does not help to understand the innermost nature of something: fragrance does not exude from the letters *a, m, b, r* and *a*, but from the *ambra* itself (41). He also loves the contrast between *gulshan*, the rose garden, and *kulkhan*, the ash-house, a contrast that was widespread in both Persian and Turkish poetry:

The ash-house is a rose garden in the company of the wise,
The rose garden is an ash-house in the company of the stupid! (109)

This is an idea expressed almost verbatim in Rūmī's work.

One discovers elegant allusions in Nāṣir's verse. A fine example is his praise of his spiritual guide, the Fatimid caliph al-Mustanṣir, whose name is derived from the Arabic root *naṣr*, 'help', and thus 'he is a mine of help and victory', an expression that points immediately to the Qur'anic sentence 'Help from God and near victory' (Sura 61/13), a favourite device in all branches of Shiism (512). And when he praises his caliph by claiming that 'Kings are all foxes while you are the lion' he certainly points to the Lion of God, Asadullāh, that is, 'Alī, the first imam.

Someone aware of the constant use in Persian poetry of imagery derived from the Qur'an will be surprised that allusions to Qur'anic figures occur comparatively rarely in Nāṣir-i Khusraw's *Dīvān*. In this respect Mūsā, Moses, is the most outstanding figure. He and his brother Hārūn, Aaron, are rather frequently quoted – one has to remember here Hārūn's role according to the Ismaili tradition: he acts as Moses's right hand and interpreter, as the *asās*, just as 'Alī did for the Prophet Muḥammad. Hārūn is several times contrasted with Haman, Pharaoh's vile, infidel minister. Moses appears mainly in connection with his rod by which he performed miracles to defend the true faith (one thinks of a modern application of this combination, e.g., Iqbāl's

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last poetical collection in Urdu, called *Zarb-i Kalīm*, 'The Stroke of Moses'): the role of Moses as the true lawgiver prophet is clearly intended by this use.

Yūnus, Jonah, saved from the fish's stomach, is also mentioned (563), and Jesus appears in some interesting combinations which, however, have rather a theological than a rhetorical background. Thus, Nāṣir-i Khusraw holds that Jesus's reference to his father is meant to be understood by the wise, esoteric people 'but the monks [i.e. the Christian theologians] have corrupted its true meaning', that is, they have taken the term 'father' at face value without understanding its spiritual aspect. This is a typical attempt at *ta'wīl*, esoteric interpretation, and in the same train of thought the poet may warn his contemporaries not to divulge the words of wisdom to the ignorant for that would be like 'casting manna and quails before the swine' (563). This is a strange though delightful combination of the 'casting pearls before swine' and the story of the children of Israel who were finally unwilling to eat the manna and quails that God sent them during their wandering in the desert.

One of the favourite figures in the Qur'anic prophetology was Yūsuf, the embodiment of beauty. The way Nāṣir-i Khusraw refers to him shows that the story of Zulāykhā's longing and craving for him was already elaborated in all its details during the poet's lifetime. But first of all, Yūsuf appears as the epitome of patience (one thinks here of the expression *ṣabrun jamīl*, 'beautiful patience', that occurs twice in the Sura *Yūsuf*, 12/18 and 12/83):

Yūsuf became a prophet thanks to patience,
But Zulaykhā was disgraced by her hurry. (39)

The beautiful Yūsuf appears also in descriptions of nature: in the dark night, Jupiter is radiant like Yūsuf in the pit while Venus, pale and confused, gazes at him like (the love-sick) Zulaykhā (564). Or else he resembles the rose (a comparison very common in later days), and when he appears the whole garden turns once more into a twelve-year-old virgin like Zulaykhā who, as legend has it, was rejuvenated when Yūsuf's spell touched her. (Nāṣir uses the same comparison when he speaks of how his aged words are now rejuvenated (339).)

As far as we can see the legendary lovers of Arabo-Persian tradition appear but rarely (see pp. 82–3 for *Rabāb*). The cloud weeps like

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Wāmiq, transforming the rose-cheeked beings into ‘Ādhrā’s (192), or else the rose is like Laylā’s face while the cypress stands before her like Majnūn (97).

As briefly mentioned, an important and in many cases the most delightful part of the classical *qaṣīda* is the introductory description. In both the *bahārīyya*, ‘spring verses’ and the description of autumn Nāṣir displays all his rhetorical skill. *Nawrūz*, the vernal equinox, was a longed-for event in the highlands of Badakhshān whose hills are covered with snow for many months (and one sometimes wonders if the mountains were really free from snow in the late days of March). But in Nāṣir’s poems one feels indeed more than a mere exercise in rhetoric when he sings of spring. He asks: as the black cloud looks like an inhabitant of Hell fire, how is it possible that thanks to it the garden turns into a paradise? The hills which were formerly wearing white caps and quilted coats have now put on a cap of striped silk (see p. 69). The spring breeze covers the steppe and the gardens with green silk (42), and the poor Egyptian willow, which was naked and disgraced, wears now a blouse of brocade and earrings (see p. 66). Even more: the trees, apples and quince trees look like Moses and Aaron in their green striped silk dresses while the dried-up weeds resemble Pharaoh and Qārūn, the infidels (98) – that is, they are destined for the Fire.

But Nāṣir also gives an explanation why the meadows now wear green silk and brocade: this is thanks to the balance of time (that is, the vernal equinox), for God has promised silken robes to those who act with justice and equity (42, s.a. 143).

Comparisons with royal robes and jewellery are typical of Nāṣir’s poetry when he sings of the gardens; this type of images was known before him (thus in Farrukhī’s verse) and remained very important in Persian poetry. The garden, once full of camphor, i.e. snow, now scatters pearls, and:

The rose is riding on a ruby mount,
The tulip walks before her like a porter.
The rose’s family are all the flowers –
Where’er she goes, she comes with all her tribe! (160)

Describing spring, even Nāṣir becomes somewhat more cheerful than usual:

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The world has become like a child of twelve years,
with a face of jasmine and with violet curls,
the spring birds arriving from India, fresh in flocks and
in flocks did they turn toward us! (489)

Nāṣir-i Khusraw also uses a comparison which was to become rather popular in later times, that is, the dust seems to be a treasure trove where gold and silver are hidden to appear in the spring as narcissus and other flowers (450).

Spring is the time of roses and nightingales, but all too soon the crows will again begin to talk loudly and scream in the meadows while the melodies of joy are no longer heard:

Disposed the army of the nightingales
from fear of all these negroes without tongues! (123, cf. 445, 304)

The similarity of the words *zāgh*, 'crow' and *bāgh*, 'garden' offers the poet a chance to combine the two – in a negative way, to be sure – and he repeats the idea that these black birds talk nonsense, like stupid people, and do not utter lovely words like the wise (137). The crow, always considered a bird connected with winter, is, however, even more than simply a stupid, distressing creature. Its black colour shows that it is a partisan of the Abbasids who deprived the Alids of their right to take over the caliphate after the fall of the Omayyads in 749, for black was the colour of the Abbasid flags and insignia. Thus one may possibly see hidden allusions to the enemies of the Fatimids whenever the crow is mentioned – all the more, as the Fatimids seem to manifest the radiant sun of spring-time, of resurrection.

Besides glorious lines devoted to gardens in spring and autumn there are moving descriptions of the sky, especially of the night sky, and again, those who have looked at the starry sky in the mountains of Afghanistan and the Hindu Kush will feel that these lines are not only traditional poetical clichés but are born from a true admiration of natural beauty, an admiration which, as we can understand, leads again to meditation on the Creator and those who teach His wisdom on earth.

What is this tent? Could one say thus:
an ocean full of pearls?
Candles, ten thousand, in a bowl
of enamel so bright?

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And if your garden were the sky,
the tulip would be Jupiter,
And were the sky a garden – then
Orion were its rose bush bright! (542)

The poet never tires of comparing the tulips and stars, the roses and Orion. Or else, the sky is a tent of blue brocade lined with velvet (598), and the night draws a black umbrella over the Pleiades, casting [black] ambra upon the mountains. Rather, the Pleiades are radiant like Moses' White Hand, which was to illuminate Pharaoh's black face, and:

The air is dark just like the tyrants' minds;
The stars shine like the faces of the pious. (215)

And then, the morning rises in the east, beautiful as a peacock, while the night disappears in the west like the mysterious bird 'Anqā, who has a name but no body (194) .

One may mention at random that Nāṣir-i Khusraw describes the sky usually in light hues, not, as most Persian poets seem to do, as *kābūd*, 'dark blue'. He sees it as *nīlūfanī*, 'coloured like the water-lily', as *akhḍar*, 'green' or as *pīrūzā*, 'turquoise'.

To be sure, Nāṣir-i Khusraw would not be satisfied with mere outward descriptions of nature: he discovers the Creator's signs everywhere, according to the Qur'anic word: 'We shall show them Our signs in the horizons and in themselves' (Sura 41/53). Thus Nāṣir sees that the miracle of Jesus – that is, to quicken the dead – is contained in each and every grain which, after being seemingly dead becomes alive and gives life (106). The human beings in this world appear to him similar to plants: some are odoriferous herbs, others grass, and therefore some become honoured and useful in the king's hand while others are food for donkeys (142). His love for the simile of the tree (see below pp. 71–3) belongs to this area. Grass seemed to Nāṣir something special: it is both perishable and perishing and yet remaining. The individual may die but the species continues (105, see p. 70).

All these ideas are often expressed in eloquent sentences, but one should mention at random that besides his tendency to use great learned words and metaphors and sometimes a highly philosophical terminology Nāṣir incorporates at times (and perhaps more frequently than the nonnative speaker of Persian realizes) common sayings, proverbial

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expressions into his poetry. Thus, unpleasant behaviour is like bad *pālūda* from the bazaar (544) – *Rūmī* too uses this expression to point out that something is ‘not the right thing’, for *pālūda*, a sweet dish made of milk, sugar and flour, cannot be properly prepared in the marketplace. He speaks of the cloud that passes by and does not care for the dogs’ barking:

I do not worry when a stupid person
pulls out a rope for me from sheer dismay.
The black cloud in the sky – why should it worry
when dogs bark loudly at it all the day?

He also warns his reader to be prudent: one cannot measure water with a sieve (329) and it ‘is useless to comb a cat’ (499).

Poetry was Nāṣir-i Khusrāw’s consolation in the hills of Yumgān, and with increasing age he seemed to become more prolific, or perhaps he liked to refer to his age more frequently: he speaks of ‘fifty-odd’ years, and in his fifty-ninth year he feels, with a traditional pun, in the net, *shast*, of sixty, *shast*. Several times sixty-two is mentioned.

The poetry he wrote has nothing to do with the traditional court poetry or with frivolous love songs. ‘Both *ghazal* and gazelle run away’ from him, and he is not interested in either of them (333), nor does he want to live among those who are captured by sweet songs because the melody, *parda*, is a curtain, *parda*, between them and true wisdom (500). For his soul and heart, he avers, only rosary and Qur’an are true and faithful companions while poetry is the dust of his feet (65). At the age of sixty-two he claims:

I am dumb and deaf from singing poems
but the praises for the Prophet’s family!
If my ear should turn to idle jesting,
Reason’s finger quickly twists my ear! (391)

And yet, he knows that poetry is something very special. Did not the Prophet call it licit magic, *siḥr-i ḥalāl*? And he, the *Hujjat*, has adorned the bride ‘Word’ with crest and wing (339)-

The word is something holy: is it not the messenger from God to humans? Jesus is an example for that word that was made flesh and appeared in human form. Therefore the word was not given to mankind that they should extend their tongues with funny tales and satire (562). Rather, a wise word – such as his own poetry – is useful for those who can think for it brings, as it were, rose scent and is better

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than the morning breeze (202). For this reason, Nāṣir feels, his verses are consoling so that his companion should read them in times of grief because they will make the grief disappear from the reader's soul (197). Nay, his, Ḥujjat's, words are a bird from whose beak and wings wisdom drops upon the wise and understanding reader; his whole *Dīvān* is a *pandnāma*, a book of good advice (289). Even Mercury would become a family member if he would descend from the sky, as Nāṣir-i Khusraw claims in a long sequence of boasts (335). For the arena for his reddish steed, *kumayt*, that is, his word, is the mind, and its rider is the soul that is acquainted with words, while intellect is its reins and thought its bridle (408). Or, in different words: Nāṣir sees himself as the shepherd of knowledge, sent by the Moses of his time, that is the imam, and as a shepherd must have a rod and a bowl, his bowl is his notebook, his rod his tongue (382).

Once, however, Nāṣir-i Khusraw seems to write in a slightly lighter mood when he devotes the introductory part of a *qaṣīda* to his miracle-working poetry:

The world turns cheerful in the month of April –
I make my thought from thinking now like April,
plant in the garden of my notes and papers
sweet herbs and hyacinths from prose and verse;
bring fruits and roses from the finer meaning;
make lovely trees from elegant expression.

Just as the cloud turns deserts into meadows
I change my notebooks into gardens now;
discussing here with the intelligent,
I scatter roses of delightful words
and should the dust of error touch the rose,
I rain upon it lucid explanations.

A castle do I build from my *qaṣīda*;
its verses are its porticos and garden.

I build in it a high observing place
and make a garden wide and open there,
and at its door a rare, good metre stands
as superintendent quite wise and trusted.

Maf'ūlu fā'ilātun mafā'īlu fa'

long long short, long short long short, short long short, long
is the foundation of this blessed house,

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and in this house, built upon the bricks of the meter *muḍāri'*, he will invite his guests to feed them with wisdom.

Nāṣir-i Khusraw often boasts of his talents as well as his religious strength, and praises the blackish bird in his pen-case that produces jewels. 'When the djinns, the demons, draw near, then,' so he tells his reader, 'recite my *Dīvān* to all the demons, *dīvān (tajnīs-i tā'm)*', for in his collection of poetry there are verses that work like the verses of the Qur'an.

When you read out my verse to friend and enemy,
he will fall down before you, either smiling or crying. (416)

That is, the friends will be utterly happy to listen to this religious poetry while the enemies fall down, dissolved in tears.

I gallop in the desert of dispute
upon the steed of 'meaning' and high thoughts –
When I attack my enemies, they all
will lose their way inmidst my hooves' dust! (372)

Not only are his verses consoling and, for the enemy, disquieting, they are, as it seems to Nāṣir-i Khusraw, truly inspired by God:

When you recite his [i.e. *Ḥujjat*'s] poems in the ritual prayer,
The trustworthy Spirit, Gabriel, will say Amen. (412)

For it is only religion that makes him utter his verse and makes it so valuable; not poetry but faith is his pride and his signal and sign (pun on *shī'r*, poetry, and *shī'ār*, sign) (438).

Who may have listened to him in the God-forsaken mountains? But he repeatedly addresses his real or imagined listeners:

Read the poetry of Ḥujjat, prudent man! learn it by heart:
In your heart his verse is honey, on your lip, it's wholesome milk! (432)

as he says with a pun on *lab*, 'lip' and *laban*, 'milk'. Even more: for the intelligent, Nāṣir's word is sweet as honey, but in the throat of the ignorant it is as abominable as *ghuslayn*, that is the water with which one has performed the ablution twice, i.e. dirty water (357), a fluid which will be the drink of the inhabitants of Hell, as he repeatedly states (518). Thanks to the majestic

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glory, *farr*, of the sacred area of the *Dhu'l-fiqār*, 'Alī's sword, poetry becomes on his tongue fragrant like pure ambergris (188), and:

My tongue is the window of knowledge, O yes!
Get up and place now at this window your ear.
The root of stupidity – I dig it out
with counsels, replacing by wisdom it here! (388)

In general, poets like to compare the poetical word to a garment for the Inner Meaning, and Nāṣir does so too. But he also turns over the traditional image and states:

The word has to be clad in meaning:
Why is your word so naked, say?
You walk in silk and brocade garments –
Why do you speak such naked words? (97, cf. 436)

Such lines are directed against the court poets who, lavishly recompensed for their flattering panegyrics and strutting about in precious robes of honour, write poetry in which external glamour prevails; they know every trick of rhetoric and are able to weave a glittering fabric of words, but when one looks more closely it is faux pearls and what seemed to be silk is in reality naked, meaningless stuff:

But he himself, thinks Nāṣir, is famed for his educational verse; not for the elegance of robes and distinctions bestowed upon him:

Tear off the rope from the unbridled masses!
You'd better bring about something in writing!
You are the pen of God, the true Creator –
well done and bravo, o you sober reed!
To Intellect, your word became the writing;
So, make a covenant and do not leave it!
Give only letters of advice and wisdom
to mankind's ear, be they low, be they high.
Without a robe of honour you are noble,
for you are known for writing, not for robes!

Whatever he says is based on reason, and animals were not granted intellect nor speech, while an intelligent person will bring forth strong proof and clear explanations in his words, for:

Speech came as Reason's child; it is not right
that Reason's child should harm and hurt your soul!

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Or, in a different comparison:

Reason is hidden under the speech.
Reason: a bride, but speech is its veil! (214)

Thus, Nāṣir's whole approach to poetry can be understood from the high rank he attributed to speech, and the word 'speech' occurs in the *Dīvān* almost as frequently as do the expressions for 'reason' and 'intellect'. 'Meaning' should be the 'lining of the robes of words' (97). That is Nāṣir's ideal, because he knows that 'everything a wise man says has expression and meaning as its woof and warp'.

But his emphasis on the Word, spoken or written, leads him also to another remark: for the true man two things are important, the sword and the pen, for with both of them he can fight the enemies of faith, and as he, in his exile, is deprived of the sword he makes his pen a weapon against untruth and infidelity (see p. 32).

The Contents of Nāṣir-i Khusraw's Poetry

The ageing thinker held to poetry, to the strength of his word, as though his verse were indeed a sword or at least a stick by which he could scare off those who had disappointed him so bitterly.

There he was, sitting in Yungān, without hope from the kings, for to whomsoever he had gone in hope of being healed, he was given only pain and grief instead of medicine. Turning from the rulers to those with *ṭaylasān* (the long hood typical of the religious class), turban, and mantle, he had hoped to find the way to religion because the world and its inhabitants gave him only faithlessness (358). Yet, it was just the religious establishment that persecuted him. The whole status of Khorasan was utterly deplorable:

I am the plank of Noah's ark
 in Khorasan;
 Of course there is no danger of
 the flood for me.
 Khorasan's people do not know
 that they are drowned.
 And full of grief, head on my knee,
 I'm sitting here. (369)

Deeply worried because of the errors of his compatriots Nāṣir-i Khusraw endures his loneliness, and yet, time and again he heaves a sigh when remembering home:

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O heart-illuminating breeze of Khorasan – come, pass
by one who sits imprisoned here in Yumgān's hilly land,
with sorrows, much more copious than pomegranate's seeds;
a body, melting more than brooks that froze in wint'ry days. (512)

Would he been banished to Yumgān if the cause of religion were not so
terribly confused?

Don't you see how the Dajjāl has over Muḥammad's *ummat* spread
rulership and kingdom in Khorasan? (569)

And time and again he cries out:

I complain to you, omniscient Lord of Power
of all people, young and old, in Khorasan! (262 ff.)

Days have passed, and he is no longer allowed to see his friends; only to
remember them is licit, *ḥalāl* – but why have these friends left him alone
after his house used to be like the *qibla*, the prayer direction, for them
(337)? Everything has changed:

This restless bluish dome! It robbed
my lustre and my loveliness.
Old age turned into bitter gourds
my life, like children's candies sweet.
My ear hears no more nightingales,
for like a magpie looks my head! (319)

Thus he complains, at the age of sixty, with skilful comparisons and
contrasts and a chain of difficult Arabic rhyme words. Really, the honey-
sweet youth turned into bitter sourmilk cheese (401); previously a proud
lion, he has become a coward fox, and:

I was a tulip colourful in April –
Now I'm a water-lily in December! (377)

Water-lilies generally symbolize the ascetics as their pale bluish colour is
reminiscent of an ascetic's garb and of his pale face – comparisons used
by the first Persian poets such as Kisā'ī. Radiant tulips, however, often
represent the healthy, cheerful countenance of a youthful beloved. Nāṣir,
so he complains, who was once running through the steppes like a polo
ball is now bent like a mallet as a result of Fate's cruelty (368). Old age
appears to him like an army that casts fetters around his arms and his

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neck (341). But who could escape Fate? Is not Time, or the never resting sphere, like a piebald horse without body and soul which runs over deserts and mountains without ever getting tired? And while under normal circumstances the rider wears out the horse, this horse wears out its riders . . . (136; cf. p. 82).

And yet, to stay in this loneliness is better for Nāṣir's soul than mixing with people who are really nothing but veritable bovines and asses. After spending fifteen years in Yumgān – what shall the poet do with people who laugh and make laugh while he neither laughs nor makes anyone laugh (367)? What is the use of seeing uncongenial people? Nāṣir answers the same question in a poem written at the age of sixty-two:

Oil does *not* go well with dregs
they are dregs, and I am oil. (366)

The comparison of the wise person with oil occurs several times in his poems, for precious oil is produced by pounding nuts – was his knowledge not such oil, extracted in the mortar of exile (469)? Is he not constantly pounded and hopes for some relief? But this is his consolation: not only nuts are crushed, but musk in the pod has also to be bruised so that it can exude its fragrance (367), and he is certainly like such a valuable matter.

To be sure, suffering has its deeper meaning but, he asks, is it not strange that black is considered the ultimate colour while his hair, as the ultimate result of all the pain that came over it, has turned white (320, cf. 461)? But, whatever may happen, Nāṣir maintained his pride and honesty:

The head of ruse does *not* rest in my bosom,
lie's sour milk fills *not* my earthen pot! (362)

as he states with an elegant pun on *dūgh*, 'sour milk' and *durūgh*, 'lie'. Rather, remaining the treasure house of the gold and silver of the true faith (366), he will never debase himself before unworthy people:

I'm not distressed and helpless in my work,
and low and high confess my excellence.
But I'd endure my hunger rather much
than take my food from an ignoble's hand! (344)

For it is preferable to go to sleep without an evening meal than to eat a

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borrowed chicken (344), ideas which, though known to ascetic Sufis too, seem to prefigure Iqbāl's sharp reaction to *su'āl*, 'asking, requesting, begging' which debases the noble human nature.

Nāṣir's enemies may be happy in the thought that he is miserable in his mountain refuge; but the true man matures only in exile, in *ghurbat*, the foreign land, just as the falcon never rests in his nest, and if iron were not part of the stone and had been extracted from its original place, it would not be able to cut the stone later on (469). Were not the noblest people exiled and mistreated? Strangely enough, Nāṣir-i Khusraw seems to avoid reference to the Prophet's *hegira* from his hometown Mecca to Medina, or to Yūsuf's adventures in the pit and the prison before he became the Mighty One of Egypt – examples which almost all mystical poets of Iran after him have used to point to the necessity of leaving one's native land. Nāṣir chooses another example: was not Salmān the Barber thrown out from 'Umar's house (518)? Salmān, the faithful friend of the Prophet's family, is here as so often contrasted with 'Umar who, as the Shia hold, usurped the caliphate from 'Alī. And the poet feels like the Simurgh, the mysterious bird and king of birds who is known, like the 'Anqā, only by name and dwells at the end of the world:

You are in Khorasan just like the Simurgh:
Your name is known, but hidden is your body. (407)

This body, too, will disappear, and the world will pass one day. The frail body will fade out and give freedom, the longed-for spiritual freedom, to the soul. There is no need to worry, the perishable parts will perish, the eternal, spiritual part will live:

This body is an oyster, and I am
in it just like a precious royal pearl,
and when the pearl is finally perfected
I shall entrust the oyster shell to Him. (371)

Nāṣir-i Khusraw knew that all he possessed, all the treasures of wisdom which he dispensed, were granted to him due to his unswerving faith in the Prophet's family to whom he had sworn allegiance. His soul is riding on the steed of Wisdom only because his *mamdūh*, the object of his praise, is the one who rides on the whitish mule Duldul, i.e., the first imam 'Alī (549). The light of the imam has turned him into a sun at morning (358),

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and as the sun, according to ancient beliefs, can transform pebbles into rubies this spiritual sun has transformed him, too, into a ruby dwelling in the lonely mountains – a precious ruby of Badakhshan (246). Did he not bind his hand to the blessed branch of the Prophet's house, that of 'Alī and Fātima? And when his hand had grasped this branch he was drawn upward like a gourd that is bound to a tree (375). (That the gourd is bound to trees in order to grow is a common image in early Persian poetry, see p. 39). To be sure, Nāṣir's thought circumambulates the mystery of God, and he often talks about His wisdom and His actions as shown in the strange and wonderful manifestations of nature, yet he refuses to predicate anything upon God – He is too high to be even thought of in human categories (see p. 50). An analysis of Nāṣir's 'theology' in the widest sense would be a desideratum.

Despite his reluctance to speak about God Himself Nāṣir-i Khusrav stresses that the ritual duties are necessary, for ablution, ritual prayer and fasting wash off the dust from one's black heart (494). It is natural that poems in honour of 'Alī (see p. 60) and constant allusions to the *ahl-i bayt* are found in Nāṣir's *Dīvān*, and there is also a lengthy poem with a sequence of curses against those who deprived Fātima of her inheritance, the oasis Fadak, and against other companions of the Prophet who forsake 'Alī (471 f.). Invectives against Sunni theologians, and also against the enemies of 'Alī in general, the so-called *Nāṣibī*, occur.

Most of the themes mentioned in such poems could also be elaborated or at least touched upon by other Shia poets. However the *Dīvān* contains a number of brief allusions to *ta'wīl*, the esoteric interpretation of the Qur'an – 'Alī's sword and *ta'wīl* belong together.

To a great extent it seems to have been Nāṣir's insistence on the esoteric interpretation of the Qur'an and the duties of a Muslim that caused his persecution by the Sunni authorities, for he complains of the preachers who speak of Paradise as though it were a cheerful party, and attacks those who perform their duties only because they hope to participate in the Other World of sweets and roasts and all kind of delightful things:

They preach to lowly people in the mosque
of Paradise and houris, food and drink,
and scream and cry out in the hope for it
as if you'd speak of barley to the ass!

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You say that heaven is no place for food –
they look at you with eyes like arrows sharp!

Nāṣir-i Khusraw knows well how difficult it is to read the Qur'an according to its inner meaning – to read the words plainly is not difficult at all (446). For the science of *ta'wīl* is a hidden virgin; it is God's science, and one should turn one's reins to that side and leave the simple gratuitous understanding to the common folk. *Ta'wīl* is in fact contained in the *tanzīl*, the revelation of the Qur'an, and wears on its head a crown of examples, *amthāl* (sing. *mathal*) (487). That means, *ta'wīl* is indeed an integral part of the revelation but one has to approach it carefully and understand the meaning of the examples in which the Qur'an abounds – and one should keep in mind that the true custodians of *ta'wīl* are the members of the Prophet's family. Thus Nāṣir says in a *qaṣīda* (514):

Religion is your pride, and literature and calligraphy and
secretarial skill
is a profession, like that of the cotton carder and tailor.
Poetry and literature and grammar are straw and stone
and earthen pots;
the verses of the Qur'an are gold and cornelian and pearls.
The meaning of the Qur'an is lucid and radiant like stars;
the examples, *amthāl*, in it are dark and obscure like nights.
Don't go to the exterior of the examples, for that will make you
only more lowly and ignominious in the company of the intelligent!

One has to understand the meaning that lies behind the simple looking stories and examples in the sacred book. Equally, the inner meaning of every religious act has to be understood, and Nāṣir's *qaṣīda* about the inner interpretation of the pilgrimage to Mecca (pp. 94–6) is rightly regarded as one of his finest, if not: the most superb of his poems: he who does not understand the spiritual aspect of the various rites of the pilgrimage has as it were not fulfilled his duty.

The poet, long suffering under the pressure of his enemies, felt that one had constantly to defend oneself and the bitterness, sometimes even crudeness of his comparisons, his tendency to address his adversaries, nay all those who do not agree with his attitude, as asses, bovines or pigs should be interpreted as his weapon against the enemies of the Faith, who in any case were destined for Hell. It is understandable that the word 'rod' appears often in his verse – it may be the rod of Moses that turned

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into a serpent to devour the serpents of Pharaoh's magicians, or the shepherd's rod which is needed to defend one's flock (and after all, Moses began his career with tending the flocks). Thus the poet admonishes the listeners:

It is not good to walk without a stick for you always see
that dogs tear the garments of strangers who have no rod.
Those dogs, who have become drunk in the days of the war of
Karbela
would definitely tear to pieces the garment of religion which
you wear! (51)

These people are the enemies of the Prophet's family, those who were responsible for Nāṣir's exile in Yumgān – people who carry the rope of ignorance and the chain of satanic insinuation around their necks.

All these trials notwithstanding, the poet is grateful that God has protected him and saved him from these *nishās*, monstrous creatures somewhere between apes and humans, half-men as it were:

O Lord of the dark blue mill –
A hundred thousand thanks be to Thee from this slave
that Thou hast saved me through the family of Thy Messenger
from the flock of these half-men! (284)

Deep as Nāṣir-i Khusraw's faith was, it is never 'the faith of the old women'; rather, it is built upon the fundament of reason, of intelligence. Therefore Nāṣir-i Khusraw invites men to think, to weigh the different possibilities, and to acknowledge that the true treasure of wisdom is given to those close to the faith. Time and again he leads the reader to the conclusion that the Fatimid ruler of Egypt, as the descendant of Fātima and 'Alī, is 'the keeper of God's garden', and that he has drawn the sword of true religion from the scabbard.

The reason-based faith, as one may call it, is not the faith of a fatalist. Fatalism, as the Sufis often claimed, serves frequently as an excuse for weak people who attribute their own transgressions and mistakes to the fact that 'it was written, and the Pen of Destiny has dried up'; hence, nothing can be changed. But No!, says Nāṣir-i Khusraw. Man's soul is like white paper and the pen by which his destiny is written is given into his own hand! God, he reasons, has created the mother, the breast, and the milk, yet the child must, by its own enterprise, suckle the milk from the

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teats. The modern reader will recognize here ideas which are found, though on a slightly different level, in Rūmī's work, but he will discover an even more obvious similarity of Nāṣir's thought with that of Muḥammad Iqbāl. To be sure, Iqbāl was a modern thinker in the Sunni tradition, and yet, in several places one senses an influence of Nāṣir-i Khusraw. That is not by chance: in the scene in Paradise in Iqbāl's *Jāvīdnāma*, 'The spirit of Nāṣir-i Khusraw the Alavit appears and sings a *ghazal*.' This *ghazal* is a fragment of a lengthy poem by Nāṣir in which faith and reason are seen together, and with an image dear to the medieval poet pen and sword are mentioned as the most important utensils of a true man:

A garment does not cover your defects –
The sword can cover them or else the pen,
And if you aren't a woman, then get up
to wield the sword or struggle with the pen!

For the sword is man's throne; the pen, his crown (429, cf. 112). As for the poem which Iqbāl quotes in part, Nāṣir tells man to grasp sword and pen together and thus lead one's steed forward to the place of glory, for if one owns these two, it does not matter whether one's body, the material mount, is lame or limping. Man's honour comes either from the pen's nib or the sword's point ... but one has to be careful: sword and pen are useless for those without faith; they cannot appreciate them.

Nāṣir then mentions in a line which, understandably, was not quoted by Iqbāl, that the Indian Brahmin is much superior to an untouchable, and yet, thanks to faith, the untouchable becomes Brahmin-like. Faith and knowledge are, as Nāṣir continues, like a piece of fine linen half of which can become a robe for the Prophet Elijah while its other half may be used as a shroud for a Jew.

Iqbāl mentions the working together of sword and pen, or else the necessary co-operation of sword and Qur'an several times in his poetry, and he agrees also in other important matters with Nāṣir-i Khusraw. One of them is the position of man in the universe. Similar to Mawlānā Rūmī, who refers again and again to the Quranic verse: 'We have honoured the children of Adam' (Sura 18/74) both Nāṣir and Iqbāl (like many more thinkers, of course) have pondered the role of human beings. If man were not something special, why would God have arranged the whole world for him?

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If you were not God's guest, why then should God
have placed you in this vault with all these candles?
Look! Who are you that for your sake there grow
in oysters corals, and in dust sweet flowers?
Look! Who are you that for your sake the sun
and moon brought gold, and Saturn lead and silver? (478)

Man's superior position is, however, burdened with duties, and Nāṣir asks, as many people may have done before and after him:

Why is the gruesome wolf for all his actions
not asked by God while we are full of guilt?
Why is the crane, lamenting without meaning,
not so contemptible while we are fools?
Why need gazelles no fasting and no prayer
and why have *we* to bear such heavy plight?
What did God give us from among the creatures
but intellect? Thus, *we* are camel-drivers! (351)

Intellect, that is the highest good God could grant to anyone, and one sometimes wonders whether for Nāṣir-i Khusraw intellect and reason is the *amāna*, the good which God entrusted to man after heaven and earth had refused to carry it (Sura 33/72). Mankind is honoured in that God sent prophets to them to guide them, and this fact once more proves the superiority of the human race:

God did not send a warner and a prophet
to bring good news
to camels, lions, elephants although they
are so much stronger. (219)

The prophetic message, however, is enclosed in the word, the Divine gift, and Nāṣir, asking what may be the best and most beautiful thing in the world answers:

The word was given us among all animals –
We are the only ones from whom a prophet rose!

If man is really so elevated, so high, what is, then, his form and meaning?
What is the relation between his body and his soul? Why does one feel so
unhappy in this material body?

Your soul is like a stranger, and your body
is like a town,

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There is no doubt: the stranger feels unhappy
in such a town. (266)

Humans tend to forget and therefore have constantly to be reminded
that their body is nothing but dust:

Your body is the child of grass,
and grass the child of dust –
That's why it's constantly inclined
toward its ancestor! (303, cf. 522)

The body, as Nāṣir often says, is an oyster, the soul its pearl, so that the breaking of the oyster shell means liberation of the soul.

The poet offers also a novel turn to the old legend according to which the devil entered Paradise with the help of the peacock, disguising himself as a snake that was carried in the peacock's beak. Did not the readers hear this story from ancient authorities like Balkhī and Bukhāri? But Nāṣir's interpretation is quite different from that of his predecessors. The story means: you are beautiful like a peacock if you find the true faith, but when your body seduces you, you are an ugly snake. Or else: reason is a peacock for you; ignorance is a snake; and the body is Iblīs, Satan, who can be overcome if you are sober and prudent (530).

The lower soul, *nafs*, and intellect; are the mind's mother and father (426), an idea frequently repeated in Sufi writing. But if wisdom and knowledge are lacking, bodily forms do not matter; they are equally lowly, and neither is there a difference between Turks and Abyssinians, nor between Arabs and Hindus (481), that means between black and white, low and high. But the truly wise men are like the eyes of the world and can discover pearls and corals even in the dry sand (155). Many centuries later, the Indo-Muslim poet Ghālib would sing in a famed poem of the *dīdavar*, the one endowed with insight who 'sees the dance of the uncreated idols already in the rock'. The only thing that really matters is understanding, wisdom and reason, as well as the right word to guide people to the true faith. Nāṣir-i Khusraw has given a brief autobiography in the lines translated by E.G. Browne:

Reason was ever my leader, leading me on by the hand,
Till it made me famed for wisdom through the length
and the breadth of the land.
Reason it was which gave me the Crown of Faith, I say,

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And Faith has given me virtue, and strength to endure and obey!

Reason is it that gives man his special place in the world:

Reason is the alchemy of weal and blessing;
Reason is the mine of kindness, good, and justice! (409)

The soul has to don the brocade of reason, for without such a brocade, *dibā*, it will never become pretty, *zībā* (25). And even more:

Death is ignorance, and life is knowledge;
Dead the ignorant, alive the wise. (427)

What can one do with people who have no idea what knowledge really means?

If someone knows the name of knowledge only –
Who has the medicine for such a state?
It's like white paper on whose backside
a title, faked, is written all in blue. (590)

Knowledge is the only means to protect oneself from the vicissitudes of Fate, and when Sufi poets would admonish their followers to use prayer as a shield to avert the arrows of evil, then Nāṣir thinks somewhat differently:

Make a shield from knowledge, for there is
no stronger shield against calamities.
Whosoever owns the shield of knowledge
will not suffer from the blows of Time. (210)

As knowledge is the best way to find the road to '*illiyūn*, the heavenly heights, one should make one's wings and pinions from knowledge and obedience (218) – the Sufis used to call Fear and Hope the wings that carry man most safely to the longed-for goal.

The unusual turn of interpretation with which Nāṣir-i Khusraw at times confronts his readers (as he did in the story of the peacock and the snake) becomes clear from his understanding of a famous Prophetic tradition. When asked how his *shayṭān*, his lower soul faculties, behaved, the Prophet answered: '*Aslama shayṭānī*, my *shayṭān* has become a Muslim (or: has surrendered to me) and does only what I order him.' While most mystics saw here the dominant role of Divine Love in transforming the lower faculties into sublime higher ones, Nāṣir understands this saying as pointing to the superiority of reason. When one cannot

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make one's body part of Solomon's army of spirits, yet, one can transform the demon that inhabits the body into a true Muslim by dint of the sword of reason (392).

Reason and proper behaviour are indeed the true ornament of men. Let women decorate themselves with silk, gold and silver – that is not a true man's attitude (72)! For what is the use of fine garments if reason and intellect are lacking?

A head in which no reason is or virtue
is certainly not better than a gourd! (200)

The image implies also that such a head is inclined rather to 'the daughter of the grape' than to wisdom, as gourds were often used as drinking vessels. The only garment for men is virtue and wisdom: the soul is like a lovely fairy while the body is an ugly demon – why, thus he asks, why is your fairy naked and your demon wrapped in elegant silk from Tustar? One should learn the washerman's profession and wash one's soul with the soap of religion and then prepare a garment of knowledge for it (91):

Do wash your soul with knowledge and obedience –
Your dress is always cleaned with soap so nicely! (588, cf. 507, 138)

The 'soapy' imagery is quite frequently used in the *Dīvān*, and Nāṣir applies it sometimes when screaming out against stupid people:

Your brains are dirty even though you wash
your turban fine with soap, your skin with potash!
But if your ignorance would give you pain,
your scream would rise up to the turning sphere! (421)

Ignorance is a heavy, ugly snake (325), and those who walk in the desert of ignorance have to face terrible demons, enemies of justice and wisdom, who sit there with their mouths open, waiting for the stupid people to fall into their trap. They have sharpened their fingernails like hooks (327)! Nāṣir never understands why people do neglect their intellect while otherwise they know very well how to use their God-given talents and faculties:

Your ear does hear, your hand does seize,
your nose can smell the herbs' sweet scent.

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Why does your intellect not work?
Your teeth are working constantly! (467)

No, these people are sitting around like rabbits, their eyes are open while their minds are asleep (489)! And they are, as we can deduct from Nāṣir's frequent complaints, talkative, chatting nonsense, discussing trifling things and frivolities:

Pure people are silent like fishes,
the chatting ones, they are like sparrows! (213)

Their talk is a pain for the intelligent, and the poet sighs:

A man with reason finds the silent cow
much better than such people talking straw!

and continues:

Although the fierce wolf should be killed – yet,
he's better than the tyrants and oppressors! (102)

It does not help when such people take on the airs of scholars or pious people. They are like owls, bearers of bad luck, as much as they may appear as Humā, that is the king-bird whose shade transforms into a king the one who is touched by it (522, 526). But these people are only pretenders and imitators:

You say whatever you have heard –
You are a lute, talk meaningless! (57)

They are like asses who spend their lives in eating and sleeping, running after the body's wishes just like a jackass runs after the female (407) (one has to remember that the ass was always a symbol of sensuality and dirty behaviour). They may look like humans, but are in reality donkeys, for:

Not everyone with wings, look, is a falcon,
For kites which live on mice, have also wings! (165)

Besides ignorance, greed is something that has to be avoided: it is a dangerous horse, made of lowliness; its horseshoes are ignomy; its reins, asking and begging (323) – again, the similarity with Iqbāl's strong warnings against 'asking' comes to mind.

In such attacks on his contemporaries Nāṣir-i Khusraw waxes very

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eloquent: these people give barely any alms or feed the dervishes; they stay awake when the sound of music reaches their ears while the recitation of the Qur'an puts them to sleep; they do not pay the muezzin properly but waste large amounts of money upon singers, granting them sumptuous caftans; rather, in their ears the wolf's howling is more agreeable than the muezzin's call because the evil spirit has placed the behaviour of wolves into their heart (425), and:

The devils laugh when they observe you sitting:
You face the prayer niche – and dream of goblets! (499)

Not only the general heedlessness upsets Nāṣir but especially that of the courtiers who overhear the call to prayer but run 'on head and eyes' when the Shah calls them to meet him. Their place is definitely Hell (502)! If they pray at all, then it is only in hope for a sensual Paradise; otherwise, when it comes to the mosque, they are like vinegar and radish, but when it comes to fun and jokes and parties, they are like an orange (609); – really, they are like pigs with their drinking habits! (284)

Nāṣir-i Khusraw, in his loneliness, pours out his wrath upon all those who enjoy festivities, wine, and music – all activities are inspired by evil spirits (271). Otherwise, how could one explain that the wine-seller is nowadays safe and happy in the taverns while he, despite all his acts of obedience bows before the prayer niche with fear and trembling? (64) No! Everything has turned wrong:

The tavern is now like a high-rised castle,
the pulpits empty, and the mosques destroyed.
The singer has become as rich as Qārūn;
Qur'an reciters: destitute and silent.
With charming youngsters spends his days the Qadi,
and the police chief drinks at midnight wine.
One drinks Husayn's blood for his morning draught,
the other one makes roast from Ṣāliḥ's camel! (67)

Wine, always red, is comparable to the blood of the martyred imam Husayn (Nāṣir uses this comparison in other places too), and to slaughter the she-camel of Ṣāliḥ, the proof of this Arabic prophet's message, is sometimes mentioned as equivalent for any grave sin: were not the infidel Thamūd, who did this, destroyed by Divine Wrath (Sura 7/71 ff.)?

The scholars are indeed the worst group of hypocrites, ostentatious

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and false. They claim to be washermen and cannot even wash their own turban, or they promise to repair someone else's roof while they cannot even repair the walls of their own house! Nothing but empty show – and thus Nāṣir invents (or repeats?) a little story:

Did you hear? There was a gourd that grew
twenty days long near a plane tree high;
then it asked: 'How many days have you?'
Said the plane 'It's more than thirty years!'
And the gourd laughed: 'Look, in twenty days
have I grown so high! Say, what's old age?'
Said the tree: 'Today, my little gourd,
is no time for quarrel between us!
Wait! Tomorrow, when the winter storm
blows we'll see who is a real man!'

Everyone seems to be like this pretentious gourd, empty-headed and selfish. The scholars sell their scholarship; they resemble crocodiles, opening their mouths in greed and stupidity to swallow bribes, and they find ways to embark upon all kind of illegal actions by twisting the law according to this or that legal school, or according to *ra'y*, opinion (278). If these lawyers are real jurists then Satan himself is a jurist (142)! And Nāṣir-i Khusraw bursts out:

You say that the essence of devils is fire –
today's devils are all concocted from clay! (175).

Once more, Iqbāl's remarks about the clay devils of our century, as expressed in his last poetical work, come to mind.

Nāṣir's intention was to spread wisdom, advice, counsel by means of his poetry. Did not the Prophet say: *ad-dīn naṣīḥa*, 'Religion consists of good advice?' Therefore he never tires of admonishing people to give up the ignoble way in which they are fettered now, to listen and to accept the wise man's, that is his, advice:

Take counsel from the wise – for wisdom
is like the father; counsel is the son,

and there is nothing more delightful and sweeter than such a counsel given by a wise man (132). For as the horizons are filled with light when

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the sun rises thus the heart of a man who has acquired wisdom is like a vast ocean (187).

But once more he takes up his warning:

Among the wise, a person without virtue
does not fit well:
It's like a string of pearls where in the centre
a stone is placed. (306)

One of the virtues the wise philosopher tries to implant into his listeners' mind is patience. Patience, called 'beautiful' in the Qur'an (Sura 12/18 and 83) is an arrow against which no shield in the world can work, and it is also a bird whose wings consist only of good things (95).

The seed and principle of victory is patience,
for patience is like olives, and victory its oil. (108)

For the Arabic proverb says *man ṣabira zaḡira*, 'Who is patient will be victorious'. Patience can also be seen as a ladder on which one climbs beyond Orion (39). And one should not despair when one is confronted with difficulties: for odoriferous herbs grow out of dung (44). To keep this in mind, and patiently wait until the drops, little by little, finally expand into an ocean (186) is the prudent person's duty.

In his advice Nāṣir-i Khusraw touches also one of the central themes of ethics, that is, 'Don't hurt lest you are hurt':

If you don't want that others hurt your heart –
why do you pierce another heart with spite? (139)

or:

Don't take revenge from guiltless hearts
as does the hawk from guiltless cranes! (331)

Not even a wolf tears another wolf to pieces while in the steppe – why does a person who tears apart another human being claim to be human (226)? For the one that causes pain will one day feel the same suffering:

The scorpion that causes pain for you –
one day he'll suffer equal pain from you! (558)

Why does the mosquito live only one day while the elephant lives a hundred years? Nāṣir answers this question:

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Because the tiny mosquito can cause
much pain and suffering to the elephant! (143)

What matters is a good name; that is, according to Nāṣir's imagery, a bird that can be caught and ensnared by good works (158). Even enemies should be overcome by good words and good works, for the intelligent does not answer a mean action by a similarly mean one; rather, one has to overcome infidelity by acting in fidelity (188).

The heavenly gates can be opened with the key of goodness, and three actions are in particular important for the believer: to eat only ritually pure things, to obey (the law and its interpreters), and not to tell lies (332). All these are the fruits of true knowledge, and when one follows the poet's advice one will live in peace in this world and hope for the next:

The night is never dark with moonlight clear;
The heart is never grieved with knowledge true. (413)

But in spite of his frequent advice to be kind and good to everyone Nāṣir knows that the true man of God has also to be just, and – as one can well understand from his own verses – he himself did not hesitate to treat the enemies and those who appeared like lukewarm Muslims with contempt, not sparing invectives against them. One can perhaps sum up his own attitude in some lines in which his favourite image, that of the sword, is used – an image which involuntarily leads the reader back to imam 'Alī's wondrous *Dhū'l-fiqār*:

You have to be, my brother, like a sword:
evil in evil's place, good with the good:
the broad sides soft and shimmering like water,
its edges hurting like a blazing fire!

The perfect combination of *jamāl* and *jalāl*, tremendous Majesty and lovely Beauty, as it is expressed in God's complementary attributes, should be manifested in the true believer as well. Centuries later, Iqbāl describes the ideal *mard-i mo'min*, the 'believer' *par excellence*, as 'soft as silk and sharp as cutting steel'. That is exactly Nāṣir's ideal. Nāṣir's comparison is, however, rhetorically superior as it does not juxtapose two items but dwells upon the qualities of a single object.

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Nāṣir-i Khusraw's tragedy was that his words of wisdom were so little heard. Who would listen to him? Who might have striven to spread the words of praise for the Prophet's children which he sang year after year and for the sake of which he had been banished into the mountains of Yumgān? Far away from the exoteric theologians who behave like donkeys and bray in hope for their fodder, Nāṣir continued to work on people's improvement. For the aspect of life that really mattered for him was in inner truth of the Divine promises and threats, the unchanging, deep truth of the revelation. With an expression known from the Gospels (Matthew 5:13) and widespread in Arabic literature he both complains, and boasts of his state:

If meat gets rotten, then apply some salt.
If salt gets rotten – what can then be done?
Don't talk to fools of Mustafā's descendants –
these ignorant are like a rainless cloud!

No place for owls is in God's wisdom city –
owls flee from cities to the ruined towns.
Spread words of Haydar, if you do not fear
to be imprisoned in Yumgān like me!

Nāṣir-i Khusraw's *Dīvān* grew out of his personal experience, and it reflects his hopes, sorrows, and his unshakable faith in the Fatimid cause. It is certainly not an easy book to read, especially when one is accustomed to the love-intoxicated verse of Mawlānā Rūmī, to the subtle elegance of Sa'di, or to the diamond-like perfection of Ḥāfiz. It will take some time until one finds one's way into this vast edifice of religio-philosophical thought with its constant emphasis on the true faith, and, as importantly, on reason and its role. While other poets often see reason as a mere servant to Love, as a guardian who brings the wayfarer to the gates of the castle where the Beloved resides, Nāṣir gives reason a much more central role in human life and, one should remember, the word '*ishq*, 'Love', does not occur in the *Dīvān*. I may have overlooked one or two instances but it seems to me that I never encountered it while working on the *Dīvān*. That, of course, is a tremendous difference from the love-inspired poetry of other poets, and even in the work of Iqbāl who, as a thinker, often comes very close to Nāṣir's thought, impetuous Love is seen as the

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power that moves sun and stars. This lack of 'Love' in the mystical sense, the lack of high-soaring ecstasy and the prevalence of sober reasoning along with critical approaches to life makes it not easy to render Nāṣir-i Khusraw's verse into a truly poetical form – we remember Shibli's remark that there is a 'lack of poetical feeling' in Nāṣir's *Divān*. The reader will be delighted when the poet describes gardens and stars in crystal-like words, with an amazing and sometimes breathtaking technical skill, and he will admire the poet's enormous learning in all areas of Islamic and scientific topics. He will, at times, even enjoy the multifarious curses which Nāṣir heaps upon his adversaries and in which he applies all his vast poetical vocabulary. Many of these aspects disappear in translation, and yet, the work of Nāṣir-i Khusraw is so unique, so important for our understanding of the religious and political situation in medieval Iran and Egypt that we thought it worthwhile to undertake at least a first attempt, trying to preserve his diction and to remain faithful to the rhetorical forms as far as possible. For even though many of his ideas and expressions appeal to a reader living in the late twentieth century in a completely different cultural setting, yet, to wrap his word, his precious words of wisdom, into a modern garb seemed unfair to him.

This translation of a small number of Nāṣir-i Khusraw's *qaṣīdas* is intended as a first step toward a better understanding of his thought. I sincerely hope that it will inspire some scholar to work on the entire theological and philosophical world view which lies behind Nāṣir's verse, and to which we could not devote our attention as it should and could be done by some able scholar who is deeply steeped in the Ismaili tradition.

Selected Poems from the *Dīvān*

A long *qaṣīda*, which is generally called Nāṣir-i Khusraw's 'Confessions', is probably the most frequently quoted part of his poetical work. In the middle of the poem Nāṣir sets out to offer his reader some autobiographical notes.

Born in 394, of the *hegira*, he was in the beginning a creature without any rational knowledge, then slowly grew into an innocent plant-like being and after resembling for some time a little bird, finally reached the stage of true humanity by acquiring intellect – that intellect by which God has blessed and honoured human beings above all other creatures.

He goes on to tell how he in constant search for guidance, looked for explanations of the mystery of life by trying out the different legal schools of Islam. The decisive moment, then, was when he re-read Sura 48, which begins with the sentence *Innā fataḥnā*, 'Verily, We have given you victory', one of the favourite verses in Shia Islam. For in verse 10 of this sura the allegiance of the men of faith is described, and 'God's hand was above their hands'. This verse was interpreted by Shiite commentaries as pertaining to the oath of allegiance sworn by a small group of 'Alī's friends – his brother, Ja'far, Miqdād ibn al-Aswad, the ascetic Abū Dharr al-Ghifārī and last but not least Salmān al-Fārisī, the Persian barber thanks to whose advice the Muslims built a trench around the besieged city of Medina in 627 and thus averted the Meccan army. The last mentioned three men were those who, at the Prophet's death, remained loyal to 'Alī and refused to acknowledge Abū Bakr as his successor, caliph.

Where, thus asks Nāṣir, where have these pious friends of the Prophet's

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family gone? Where is the blessed tree under which they assembled? Was it possible that God's statement that Muḥammad was sent as a 'shining lamp' and 'warner and bringer of good tidings' (Sura 33/45) should be no longer valid? Is it his, Nāṣir's fault that he was born too late to be a member of this blessed company?

Thus he decided to wander through the world, to travel in search of Truth – a journey which he describes in highly poetical verses. The enumeration of contrasting pairs of countries and people, like Turk and Hindu, Persian and Arab makes one wonder whether they are merely used as rhetorical devices, as is common in poetry, or reflect perhaps some real experience. However, the artistic form seems to cover reality with a poetical veil – does the poet not claim to have wandered from the lofty place of Orion to the depth of the universe where the mythical fish carries the bull upon whom the earth rests?

In all these places he listened to the learned men of the different communities, but he refused to believe their words on hearsay, simply by *taqlīd*, blind imitation, and thus he continued his way in quest of Truth until he reached the city of Cairo. This was the place to stay; here he would find the longed-for answer. And how impressed he was by Cairo is evident from his descriptions in his *Safarnāma*, for which this *qaṣīda* is a kind of poetical commentary:

You know that God has ordered only Truth,
Speak and think truth; truth be the end and fruit!
Unlock your heart, and follow the Qur'an
to find the way – and open will the door!
I'm not surprised if you don't find the way,
for I was too, like you, seduced, astray!

Three hundred ninety-four, that was the date
when mother placed me on this dusty earth,
and without knowledge did I grow like plants
which, watered by the rain, grow from black dust.
From plants I reached the state of animals
and was just like a birdie without wings.
Some traces of humanity appeared:
this silly body was endowed with speech.
And forty-two times turned the spheres for me –
my reason sought and sought Intelligence.

I heard the science of the skies, the days
from learned men and read book after book.

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I found myself superior to then all
and thought: There must be a still better man,
like hawks among the birds; camels in beasts;
like dates among the plants, rubies in stones,
like the Qur'an among the books; the Kaaba,
like hearts in bodies, sun among the stars

My soul was grieved from pondering and thought;
my spirit asked from thinkers, asked and asked
from Shafiite and Māliki, Ḥanīfa –
we sought the guidance of the Chosen One.
But when I looked for Why and How and Proof
they soon turned deaf or blind, wept helplessly.

One day I read 'Allegiance' in the Book
where God said: 'And My hand above their hands.'
Beneath a tree, some men had sworn allegiance,
These Ja'far and Miqdād, Bū Dharr, Salmān!

I asked myself 'Where is this tree, this hand?
Where do I find this hand to pledge allegiance?'

They said: 'There is no tree left nor such hand;
that group is scattered and that hand concealed!'
Friends of the Prophet, meant for Paradise!
For that allegiance gave them special rank.
I said: 'It's clear from the Qur'an that Aḥmad
Is 'Warner' and 'Illuminating Lamp'.
If infidels want to blow out this lamp –
God makes it shine above all infidels!
How come that now no one of these is here?
Did the Most just perhaps not speak the truth?
Whose hand shall *we* take? How to bind ourselves
To God? Should *we* be worse than previous ages?
What wrong did *we* that we were unborn then?
Why are deprived we of the Prophet's presence?
Our face – like roses pale from ignorance!
This cypress bent too early, like a hoop!

Bent from grief at too early an age, Nāṣir-i Khusraw now ponders what
to do, and decides to leave his native land which, without him, will
resemble musk without scent, rocks without gold ore.

The wise man is like musk, his scent is wisdom
Or is like mines, and knowledge is the gold.
If fragrance leaves the musk and gold the rock bed,
musk has no worth, and stones are but false gold.

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I'll go like fragrance from the musk; like gold
from stones I'll go to look what happened here!

Thus I got up and went on journeys long,
forgot my home and thought not of my garden;
from Persians, Arabs, and from Hindus, Turks,
from Sindhis, Romans and from Hebrews too,
from Manicheans and philosophers
I made enquiries as to this affair.

I often made from stones my bed and pillow,
I often made from clouds my tent and blanket,
now in the depths conversing with the Fish,
now high on hills above Orion's crown,
now in a land with water white as marble,
now in a world with dust as black as charcoal,
now ocean, now the heights, now pathless travel,
now mountains and now deserts and now river,
now ropes around my neck like camel drivers,
now burdens on my back just like a donkey –
From town to town I went in constant asking,
and from this sea to that land, always seeking.

But whatever the seeker was told, he could not accept it for he refused to believe by simple imitation. Thus he continued his quest.

One day I reached a town before whose greatness
the heavens and horizons seemed like servants,
whose gardens were replete with fruits and roses,
land full of trees, and walls well decorated;
its fields designed like colourful brocade,
its water, honey like the well of Kawthar;
a town in which the houses are of virtues,
a garden where the trees are made of Reason;
a town in which the wise men wear brocade
not woven by a female or a male;
a town where my intelligence announced:
This is the place to ask – don't go away! . . .

A slightly different picture is offered at the end of another lengthy *qaṣīda* which again states the year of the poet's birth but is, in certain parts, poetically even stronger than the poem translated above. Nāṣir-i Khusraw uses in these verses one of his favourite images, that of the sword drawn from the scabbard, an image that can be used for the sword of reason, or that of the rising sun, and in extension for the appearance of the true, that is

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the Fatimid, ruler and the victory of the true faith. The image is not rare or novel in Persian poetry, but once more one thinks of Iqbāl, who compares himself to Goethe: in the dedicatory poem of his *Payām-i Mashriq*, 'Message of the East' (1923), Goethe is seen as a glittering, active sword while Iqbāl sees himself as a sword still hidden in the scabbard, though ready to be used.

If we believe Nāṣir-i Khusraw's second account, his search for wisdom goes back to the earliest stages of his conscious life, and he boasts of having studied the official writings of the ancient Persian kings such as the Sasanian rulers Khusraw or Nōdhar. (Is this perhaps an allusion to his own occupation in the administration?) He claims to have been interested especially in natural sciences, astronomy and the like; this is borne out to a certain extent by the imagery he likes to use in his poetry; such as colourful descriptions of the sky and of the heavenly bodies and their qualities. He indulged, as he tells, in secret sciences as found in the *Almagest* (and this interest is probably reflected in the popular tales that were told about his magic powers). Furthermore, he has studied and practised Euclidian geometry, pharmacy and medicine in order to learn the qualities of drugs according to their character as hot, dry, cold and humid and their application. Besides, he devoted himself to music – and this enumeration of sciences along with the emphasis on music looks indeed like a kind of summary from the *Rasā'il Ikhwān aṣ-Ṣafā*, the Encyclopedia of the Brethren of Purity, that famous tenth-century group of esoteric Shiite philosophers. But in pursuing his studies Nāṣir's soul became increasingly confused by these futile attempts to discover the Truth, until he finally found rest in the deep faith in God, His prophet, and 'Alī (here, as so often, called Ḥaydar, 'Lion'). At the end of his poem he highlights the necessity to believe in the resurrection, a thought repeated in other poems too. This event, upon which the Qur'an dwells so frequently and intensely, was apparently central to him because of his emphasis on human responsibility:

Three hundred ninety-four – that was the year:
 My mother bore me in the month Dhu'l-qa'da.
 Then came some years with only little work;
 my world consisted just of sleep and eating.
 I did not know of ugly nor of good,
 did not distinguish dates from burning coals.

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Then, when from some material food I gained
a solid body, Reason's morning-sword
struck suddenly the night of ignorance;
my heart lit up like sunrise in the East,
and I began the quest for wisdom, knowledge
and did not mix the untrue with the truth.
He who knows hyacinths, would he not see
when thorny weeds grow all along with them?

Whatever wisdom I heard of, I sat
close to its door and stayed there as if fixed!

I read all the decrees of kings like Kisrā
and contracts of Anūshirvān and Nōdhar;
I learned from textbooks of astronomy
about the Pole and Pisces, Ursa Major;
now in the science of the Almagest,
now drawing forms with compasses and ruler,
now different kinds of music (for the humans
produce their images in melodies),
now all the qualities of drugs and pills
(which one is hot, which dry, and which one humid)
the figures too of Euclid, once invented
by Aristotle, Alexander's master –
there was no knowledge in the world from which
I not took benefits; some more, some less.
There was no sentence in the books of God
which I heard not in detail from a sage.

My heart became replete with Why's and How's
so that my soul became confused and rattling.
My soul was cured no more by any knowledge
but by the claim of our Prophet's house.
Once more did I attach myself to them;
I overcame the Satan and was happy.

Belief in One God, faith, and the Qur'an,
Religion of the Prophet, and of Ḥaydar!

I know from God's word and from logic too
that Resurrection comes, the Balance too!
Those who despise the way of faith – you'll see them
tomorrow filled with sadness and remorse!

But how to describe the One God whom the poet-philosopher knows
through His prophet and the imams?

In the *Rawshanā'īnāma*, Nāṣir begins his discourse with a *tawḥīd*, a
poetical praise of God's unity. This type of introduction became

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customary with the poets in the Persianate world who often used the *tawhīd* elegantly to touch upon the actual theme of their epic poem. Nāṣir feels that God is too great to be comprehended by human efforts. Whatever one may say does not reach Him for He is truly without comparison and without likeness.

After stating this point, Nāṣir makes a highly interesting philosophical attempt to inform his readers how one may try to understand God. Is it not preposterous to claim that He has created the four elements and the seven spheres? He is much too sublime to do such work! Rather, one should say that He gave mankind intellect and nourishes it. Thus, for intelligent, understanding people the outward manifestations in this world are caused by the Universal Intellect, which is the first acting power created by God. It is the First Intellect and his activities that can be observed in the working of nature, in the growth and decomposition of organisms. It would be a pagan attitude to call the all-pervading spirit that makes things grow and move, a 'deity'. God is beyond such attributions. What we perceive are only the acts that lead our reason to the One, Incomparable Creator who works through the First Intellect.

These ideas certainly did not make him popular with the orthodox theologians of Eastern Iran! But he speaks forcefully what he realized as true:

In the Creator's name, the Pure, the Ruler,
He, higher far than intellect and thinking!
He is the First, He is the Last for ever;
no one is prior to Him, none is later.
His Essence, an abyss, confuses reason –
know Him as free from stars and from directions.
How could one see Him with the body's eye?
The soul's eye only sees the Soul of souls!
His nest lies far behind 'There-where-no-place' is –
What can I say? It's always much too lowly!
His attributes, His Essence are primordial.
To understand that is a mighty journey!
How could one travel there with human feet?
How to arrive there on this earthly steed?
My reason hid its head due to its weakness:
'How could I dare that, don't dare to pronounce it –
I am too small to utter such a word!'
The tongue can not express His Unity –

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He is too great, beyond comparison!
I don't say: 'He created Four and Seven.'
I say: 'He nourishes the intellect.'
Do sun and moon and spheres have any value?
You cannot attribute these things to Him!
Why do you say that He created rubies
and gold and jewels out of clay and water?
You say: 'He brings the flowers forth from dust!'
It is not fitting to describe Him thus!
The vegetative spirit does this work
by planting roses, box-trees, cypresses!
Know: Soul and reason are from God – what's silver?
What's gold? Don't worship forms! What's head and foot?
You also say: 'It is alone from semen
that He made here appear all our forms!'
Don't talk like that! For all these artful acts
come from the influence of stars and natures.
To call the sphere, the elements, the spirit
of vegetation 'god', seems pagan thought!
Don't lose your way in thinking how the creatures
were formed! From wheat comes wheat, from barley, barley.
He, who created souls and knows their secret,
He has no company in Being God!
You speak of 'faith' and 'infidelity' –
You don't know the beginning nor the end!
With such an immature weak intellect
how can you call yourself a Muslim, say?
For if you have such thoughts concerning God
you are inferior to Christians, Jews!
The erring Parsee does not say such things –
I beg God to forgive such words and thoughts!
Lord of the Universe, All-Knowing, Mighty –
know Him as One, and one appeared from Him!

And this one that appeared is, as Nāṣir explains in the following verse, the First Intellect.

The One and only God, however, is addressed, or circumscribed, in many more poems in the *Dīvān*. In the beginning of a *qaṣīda* He appears as the *Prima Causa*, the first cause of everything:

The Lord who in His Unity
is earlier than anything:
His Unity does not contain

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plurality; He's free from time.
 How did He make the world appear?
 From what did He create it first?
 There was no matter and no form,
 there was no breadth, there was no height.
 He was the cause preceding all
 that has been caused – thus one would say,
 just as the One in numbers is
 and like the fractions of a whole. . . .

But although God is beyond description Nāṣir-i Khusraw calls Him again and again in days of need and sorrow and in periods when he despairs of his contemporaries. For he knows – and he feels consoled by this idea – that God will definitely punish the mean people, those who have never felt the breeze of faith which could destroy the night of their ignorance. Are these stupid people not horrible? Instead of looking forward to the sweet waters of Paradise they seem to gaze, by their very acts of disobedience, toward Hell, into the fire and into the dirty washing water, *dhū ghislīn* which they will drink there.

But to know that God is both merciful and wrathful, gracious and threatening, as He has described Himself with all His names in the Qur'an, does not mean that one can describe Him in terms related to time and space. After such deliberations, the poet continues his *qaṣīda* with thanks to his Lord for whose sake he has forsaken the company of human beings and has been exiled because of serving Him as it behoves. Once wealthy and famous, he now lives in poverty and loneliness. However, such a temporary affliction as he undergoes in Badakhshān is preferable to eternal Hellfire; it will purify him spiritually, for worldly goods may be only a trap to drag man into the company of demons as one sees in the case of those who sell their religion for monetary rewards.

What creatures are these men!
 What world, O Generous!
 I don't see anyone
 who fears You or feels shame!
 These donkeys have fulfilled
 what You said in Your oath –
 Now You will doubtlessly
 fill Hell with all of them
 and yonder Paradise,

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as vast as all the spheres,
 is not for these, O Lord,
 O Merciful! It's not!
 It is so narrow now
 as is a needle's eye –
 It's empty – none of these
 will enter there, not one!
 They live in the dark night
 of disobedience;
 they do not seek a breeze
 from true religion's dawn;
 no one buys any more
 sweet waters, *salsabīl*;
 they gaze on blazing fire,
 on dirty water there!
 They do not show delay
 in all their sins – but You,
 O God, are merciful
 and are so mild and kind!
 I do not say: You are
 eternal, temporal . . .
 What You, Eternal One!
 create is temporal.
 How can one say to You
 begetter or begotten?
 Mothers and barren wives
 both are Your servants, Lord.
 Here, in Your prophet's house,
 this sacred, holy place,
 here do I find from You
 the graces of both worlds,
 and it befits You, Lord,
 that in this very place
 You keep Your servant safe
 and without pain and grief,
 for my estrangement is
 because of Your faith, for
 Your faith is, Mighty King,
 for me a mighty thing!
 I am a stranger here,
 exiled in poverty;
 I came by chance, without

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a friend or company.
 But better sour milk
 and dry bread in such state
 than eating blood and pus
 and poison-fruits in Hell!
 If Your affliction lasts
 not in eternity –
 then the affliction is
 quite wholesome for the soul!
 If I don't find a horse,
 a donkey is enough,
 and if not precious robes,
 I wear a goat-hair frock.
 What's on your head and foot,
 becomes a demon's trap,
 and shoe and turban turn
 into a net for you.
 I have become like gold,
 pale, for the sake of faith –
 you left, like mercury,
 for silver's sake the faith!

The poet at times nearly despaired when thinking of how to describe the Ineffable Creator, but still cannot help turning to Him whose Essence is far beyond imagination and who can be approached only by believing. Mysterious are His actions, setting everything in motion, producing colours and tunes! To describe only one aspect of God in the right way would deprive even Gabriel, the carrier of revelation, of his mighty wing! He would break his pinion because of the power inherent in the smallest word that dares deal with the unknowable unique God. For, in accordance with Neoplatonic theory, God cannot be described by human effort as He has no similarity with anything (that is why Nāṣir used the term *tanziḥ*, 'abstraction', in this connection), yet once He reveals His Beauty it is like a bride whose veils are the heavens (for garments may lead the amazed spectator to an understanding of the glory hidden behind the veils).

Nāṣir-i Khusraw, despite his acknowledgment of God's incomparability, has tried, as all mystical thinkers do, to approach God by questions and by descriptions, and he sees the whole universe bowing in obedience before its Creator, as the Qur'an had described it.

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The sky is, in its turning, obedient to God
and the rotating sphere is kept in harmony.
The sun's obedience produces night and day,
and reason understands: It causes night and day.
The cloud there in the air: a servant of the Lord
which, in obedience, brings rain upon the world . . . (225)

Nāṣir-i Khusraw sees God as the mighty calligrapher who writes constantly and whose pen's work is visible in semen and egg, in roots and grain; he draws father and mother and child as He draws willow trees and apples and grapes, and as one of his designs are horse, cow and donkey, thus another one is manifest in fruit, leaf, and wood (73). Therefore, the poet asks, as thousands of thinkers before him and after him have asked:

Who made this turquoise-coloured turning dome
without a window or a roof or door? (254)

and wonders:

Who granted stripes to onyx from the Yemen?
From where comes fragrance of the ambergris? (38)

Long chains of such admiring rhetorical questions are used to point to God's omnipotence and His mysterious acts. How can the magnet draw the iron? How can both salamander and moth seek the fire; the one to rest therein, the other to immolate himself? Why does the falcon attack and overcome the duck, which flees from him? How can the excrement of the sea-cow be transformed into precious amber? How can fire be hidden in stone, roses among thorns, the soul in the body? How does the roaring cloud bring rain? And how can the uni-coloured egg produce multi-coloured birds; birds which are completely different from each other (189 f.)?

Nāṣir ponders these questions time and again, but he also knows, as did the Sufis, that God is like the sun whose supreme radiance conceals its essence from man's eyes: just as the eyes are blinded when one tries to look at the sun thus intellect's eyes are blinded when one tries to understand the Divine Essence; rather, such an attempt will obliterate man completely. Whether one thinks in this connection of Mawlānā Rūmī's warning that the sun, which illuminates the world, would immolate everything if it were to come closer, or of the story of Arjuna who could not

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bear to see Krishna in his real, fiery form: all religious traditions agree that God cannot be seen in His true form; that would be fatal for the frail human being. For this reason, Nāṣir-i Khusraw too praises the Lord who transcends all imagination and who may be called the True Beloved of the world – yet there is not a single lover who might be suitable to draw near Him . . . : beautiful words which, however, seem not quite in tune with the poet's usual approach to the mystery of God.

O You whose Essence cannot be imagined,
while intellect affirms You by belief!
Your name is not in need of forms and limits;
Your Essence is beyond the bodies, species . . .
Your word does order good without loud statements,
and without speech, Your work prohibits evil.
Your order: 'Dance!' makes dance the great sun's disc
and it stirs up the lively shadows too.
Your work, that's turning constantly the spheres,
mixed up the colours in a lovely way . . .
The mighty wing of Gabriel is broken
when one describes You in Your Holy Nest.
You show Yourself in abstract purity;
Your Beauty seems a bride, adorned with spheres.
O You who are as radiant as the sun
and hidden by the shade of Your own light:
You are the world's Beloved, but You know
no single lover who is suitable . . .

The only way to reach God is through His prophet, Muḥammad, also called Aḥmad (cf. Sura 61/6) or Muṣṭafā, 'The Chosen One'. Perhaps Nāṣir would have agreed with Iqbāl who addressed his beloved Prophet in terms common to those of generations of bards:

With you I speak openly; with God, through a veil!

The great poem devoted to the Prophet in Nāṣir-i Khusraw's *Dīvān* gains its particular strength from the use of the Prophet's name as *radīf*, repeated rhyme word, preceded by words ending in a stressed *īn-i*. The metre is *mutaqārib*, one short and two long syllables repeated four times, which gives the *qaṣīda* a lovely movement fitting for the expression of joy and trust.

The poet speaks of his faithful attachment to the Prophet, to the

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religion he has brought and in whose *umma*, 'religious community – the folk', he hopes to live as a humble servant. Did not the Prophet bring back from his heavenly journey the promise that he is going to intercede at Doomsday for all members of his *umma*? For when everyone, every prophet will cry out *nafsī, nafsī*, 'I myself, I myself [want to be saved]; he will cry out *ummatī, ummatī*, 'My community, my community!' Hence, to belong to his community gives humans hope for the future.

Muḥammad can be compared to an ocean of faith in which the most precious pearl is the Qur'an which was revealed to him and which he has preserved. It is the Qur'an that is the mine of wisdom, a book where one can find everything as long as the world continues, as Nāṣir states in another poem (137), and he knows that only the blessed Qur'an is the reason for his heart becoming blessed (293).

But who should be the person trusted, to take care of the Qur'an after the Prophet's death? We as normal believers would hesitate to entrust even our little treasures to a stranger – how then could the Prophet have entrusted the treasure of faith to anyone but the members of his family, that is, to 'Alī, the husband of his beloved daughter Fāṭima, when he was designated to succeed the Prophet, and their two sons, Ḥasan and Ḥusayn? These two grandchildren are as close to the Prophet as is the letter *s* in Arabic script to the letter *sh* (that is, differentiated by the addition of three dots). This allusion seems to be to the pet names of Ḥasan and Ḥusayn, i.e. *Shabbar* and *Shabbīr*. These darling grandchildren are like beautiful flowers grown out of the Prophet's soil. Nāṣir's verses remind the reader of the numberless poems in which writers from all over the Muslim world, in particular the eastern lands of Islam, expressed their love for the two imams who, during their childhood, were tenderly caressed by their grandfather, who would even carry them on his shoulders and on his back as though he were their camel. How could one prefer anyone to these two noble souls?

It is logical that 'Alī's role is strongly emphasized. While Muḥammad brought the Divine Word, the Qur'an, 'Alī was his helper, defending the faith with his miracle-working double-edged sword *Dhū'l-ḥiqār*. As Moses was assisted by his brother Aaron (Hārūn) thus was Muḥammad by 'Alī. 'Alī, as Nāṣir mentions in another *qaṣīda*, reached his rank like a radiant sun at the Day of Ghadīr Khum, when he was appointed by the Prophet (270). For he is the hero of faith before whose sharp lance 'Amr and

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‘Antar became like helpless ants (318) – the contrast between ‘Alī Ḥaydar, ‘the lion’ and his antagonist ‘Antar, as it appears several times in Nāṣir’s *Dīvān*, was to become commonplace among Shia poets, and is still used by Iqbāl.

Both during the battle of Siffin in 657 and during the battle of the Trench thirty years earlier, it was ‘Alī’s sword that showed rebels and tyrants the way to the bottom of Hell (270) and as his prowess in war was unsurpassable so was his knowledge because it did not consist of talking and narrating from this or that person but was like an incomparable pearl (270), as it was experiential, God-given.

‘Alī, Ḥaydar or Asadullāh, ‘God’s lion’, is indeed a brave lion in the thickets of the religion revealed to Muḥammad. One can see here probably a connection with the frequent Sufi image of the saint as ‘the golden lion in the dark forests of this world’.

Skilfully, Nāṣir-i Khusraw introduces the famous *ḥadīth* according to which the Prophet said: ‘Seek wisdom even in China’ – a *ḥadīth* which the poet seems to have liked, if we judge from its frequent use in the *Dīvān*. Thus he says with a series of puns in a *qaṣīda*:

I’ll teach you the way to the China, *chīn*, of faith,
 If you do not make your face and forehead full of wrinkles, *chīn*.
 The family of *Yāsīn* (= Muḥammad) has a second China –
 You should go to the second China, not to the first one.
 Your China is exoteric, and *Māchīn* is like its inner, *bāṭīn*, aspect –
 You have been to *Chīn*, but *Māchīn* is still before you. (434)

It is necessary to progress from exoteric wisdom to esoteric understanding, which is possible only by clinging to the family of the Prophet, who are the guardians of *tawḥīd*. Did not the Prophet state: ‘I am the city of wisdom, and ‘Alī is its gate!’ Thus, Nāṣir-i Khusraw finds in ‘Alī’s words a sweetness that resembles Muḥammad’s honey. This may be a general comparison, but one should keep in mind that the Prophet’s fondness for honey is well attested and that in popular legend ‘Alī is sometimes called ‘the Amir of the bees’ (because they helped him in battle), and that another legend connects him with the mysterious discovery of honey. Thus Nāṣir-i Khusraw’s simple verse toward the end of this *qaṣīda* may well have several layers of allusions (something we can suspect for many more verses).

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I chose the Qur'an and the faith of Muḥammad,
 for that is the choice that was made by Muḥammad.
 I'm certain by faithfully following these,
 my certitude will be like that of Muḥammad.
 My key for the heavens, my guide to delight,
 my fortified castle: the faith of Muḥammad!
 Muḥammad is sent as God's prophet to us:
 thus is the imprint of the seal of Muḥammad.
 The faith, the Qur'an – they are fixed in my heart
 just as they were fixed in the heart of Muḥammad.
 My hope is to be – by the grace of the Lord –
 the lowliest one in the folk of Muḥammad.
 In the ocean of faith you see, the Qur'an
 Is the most precious pearl in the hand of Muḥammad.
 As every king has a treasure concealed,
 thus is the Qur'an: treasure trove of Muḥammad!
 Now look at the jewel that sits on this treasure!
 Whom do you consider the trustee of Muḥammad?
 His followers find yonder jewel of faith
 from nobody else but the sons of Muḥammad.
 Muḥammad entrusted his treasure and goods
 to one person, worthy and close to Muḥammad.
 Who was such a close friend? He whose dear wife
 was none but the darling black-eyed, of Muḥammad.
 From this darling child and that cousin appeared
 Ḥasan and Ḥusayn, letters close to Muḥammad.
 I know certainly this: Ḥasan and Ḥusayn
 are jasmine and rose in both worlds, of Muḥammad.
 Where could such a rose and such a jasmine appear
 in both worlds but out of the soil of Muḥammad!
 I don't dare select any one among men .
 above these two sons, lovely sons of Muḥammad;
 I don't dare select anyone above them -
 I would be ashamed of the frown of Muḥammad!
 The sword of pure Haydar, the mighty Qur'an
 are cornerstones of the strong faith of Muḥammad,
 for he stood as master and with Dhū'l-fiḡār
 in every fight to the right of Muḥammad.
 Since 'Alī's sword helped the mighty Qur'an;
 'Alī was the helper, no doubt, for Muḥammad.
 As Aaron to Moses, so was 'Alī in rank
 A partner in faith and close to Muḥammad.
 On Doomsday both Moses and Aaron will kiss

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the mantle of 'Alī, the hem of Muḥammad.
 Muḥammad's religion resembled a thicket:
 The lion: 'Alī, in the woods of Muḥammad.
 Muḥammad said: 'Go, and seek wisdom in China!
 I went to that China, the land of Muḥammad.
 I heard from the heir of the Prophet such words
 which were like the honey, so sweet, of Muḥammad!

Then the poet takes issue with those who blame him for his deep love of the Prophet's family, and he knows: anyone who insults the children of Muḥammad is like insulting the Prophet himself. What will he answer when the Prophet appears before him at Doomsday?

The encomium for 'Alī, which closes the poem in honour of the Prophet, was, understandably, enlarged in an independent *qaṣīda*, which follows the same metrical pattern. It begins with the lines:

The spring of the heart of the friend of
 'Alī is constantly filled with the view of 'Alī . . . ,

but, as the poet confesses, despite his uninterrupted occupation with the first imam it is impossible to tell even one thousandth part of his virtues.

In this connection it should be mentioned that Nāṣir also wrote a small poem concerning the law of inheritance. This was perhaps a major issue in his disputes with his non-Shia adversaries. The Sunni viewpoint may have been that, if the heritage goes to the son-in-law that one could maintain that 'Uthmān, the third caliph, would have been the right heir as he was married subsequently with two daughters of the Prophet both of whom, however, predeceased him and left no children. But according to Shia views only Fāṭima, the Prophet's surviving daughter, was entitled to inherit from her father and then to pass it on to her two sons.

It's said: Our Prophet, when he left this world
 bequeathed the rule to such and such a man.
 But never did a king of any realm
 such thing – look up the books of kings of yore!
 No Muslim leaves his heritage to strangers,
 but son and daughter, son-in-law, and nephew!

In another extensive *qaṣīda* in praise of 'Alī, Nāṣir emphasizes again the necessary co-operation of Qur'an and *Dhū'l-ḥiqār*, and he compares Muḥammad to the sun while 'Alī, often called *karrār*, 'the one who attacks

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repeatedly', is like the sunlight. Neither can exist without the other, and those who do not perceive the Sun of Faith and its light live in the darkest night of the heart.

Two foundations has Islam –
the Qur'an, and *Dhū'l-fiqār*.
Muslims do agree with that
and the pagans do it too.
As there is in human speech
no light but in Aḥmad's word,
thus there is in no sharp sword
fire, but in 'Alī's sword.
Aḥmad, Chosen, is the sun,
Ḥaydar, 'the Attacker', light –
Light cannot be without sun,
sun cannot be without light.
Firmest handle is for all
love of 'Alī's children dear:
Shia are those who are not
wav'ring in their bond to him!
On the treasure which God High
placed in Aḥmad's heart, there is
not a treasurer but 'Alī,
no dispenser but 'Alī,
For upon his tongue God has
opened all of knowledge's locks –
There is no one in the world
like to 'Alī Murtaḏā
And the ocean full of pearls
is near him all unimpaired:
for there is no royal pearl
precious like his fingertips!
Ev'ryone from whom the light
of the Sun of Faith has gone –
All his days are nothing else
but black night, but darkest night!
Useless is the body's eye
when the sun does no more shine...
Would the heart's eye be of use
when the Sun of Faith is dark?

To explain how he found the way to wisdom and faith, Nāṣir-i Khusraw likes to insert into his poetry short remarks or little stories about his earlier

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experiences during his quest for Truth. In the following account he does this in what looks like the description of a vision of a heavenly abode to which he was guided by a mysterious person – perhaps in Cairo. After recounting this visionary experience by which he was apparently initiated into esoteric wisdom Nāṣir-i Khusraw turns to ‘Alī, and the second part of the *qaṣīda* contains a superb description of ‘Alī’s role as the counterpart of the great prophets mentioned in the Qur’an: like Noah, he brought a spiritual flood over the enemies of the true faith; while Abraham was blessed in that Nimrud’s pyre turned for him into a rose garden (cf. Sura 21/69), ‘Alī’s presence turned into fragrant gardens those hearts which were smarting in the fire of ignorance. The traditional comparison of the first imam with Aaron as the interpreter of the revelation is mentioned. But ‘Alī was even more – his miraculous sword killed the enemies of faith just as the transformed rod of Moses devoured the sorcerers’ serpents. And while Jesus revived the dead by his breath, ‘Alī revived the stupid who, in their lack of true knowledge, were spiritually dead.

O poet eloquent, why are you silent?
Why don’t you well arrange your pearls and corals?
If you’re a rider on the steed of wisdom,
why don’t you come into the heroes’ raceground?
You’ve seen the world; you have experience,
have heard the words of Persian kings and Arabs;
Geometry, that was where you excelled
in Sind and Hind, in Khorasan as well,
and when you counted, the created world
was like a seed of rue in your high thought.
The specialists in East and West, they brought
abundant witness for your lofty claims!

But then, the poet tells, he was instructed by a guide, whose wisdom by far surpassed anything the proud poet had understood to that moment. The identity of this master, however, is not disclosed.

The master turned my night into full daylight,
thanks to his proof as clear as sunshine bright;
he made me drink so much of Living Water
that death seemed unimportant now to me.
I looked out from the corner of his viewplace
and saw the turning skies beneath my feet.

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He showed me all that's present in the world here
in one place in my body, clear and hidden.
I saw the Lord of Hell along with Riḍwān,
saw Hell and Heaven in my breast located.
He said to me: 'I am this one's disciple!'
and pointed then into Riḍwān's direction.
I saw eight gates; they were all closed together
above each other; there were seven open.
'Whichever gate you want to enter first, friend!' –
he said, 'you have to get from him an order!'
I asked the master to explain this story;
he showed me both its end and its beginning:
'This is the Lord of our Time, the ruler,
whom God selected out of men and jinns.'

This ruler is the present imam. Logically, a description of the true faith follows, Muḥammad and 'Alī are extolled, and the latter one is compared to the earlier prophets:

Now, in this way, as Noah by his wrath
brought Flood upon the folk of unbelievers
thus 'Alī rained upon the souls of tyrants
in all the world a deluge from his sword.

I read: For Abraham, the son of Azar
grew roses and narcissus in the fire –
but 'Alī, from the fire of ignorance
made gardens blossom in the human hearts.

Do you know anyone like him as Aaron
in the community of the believers?
As Aaron was interpreter to Moses,
who brought the proofs against Fir'awn and Haman –
'Alī, interpreter of revelation,
is like him, and he knows the deeper truth.

And if you think that Moses's proof was simply
that a dry stick became a crawling snake,
then call a dragon him whose cutting sword
rained death upon the enemies of faith!

If Jesus, Mary's son, thanks to his magic
filled soulless bodies fresh with soul and life,
then many dead were quickened by religion
alive is he who knows; dead are the stupid.

A long description of 'Alī's prowess in war closes the *qaṣīda*.

For Nāṣir-i Khusraw, the victory of the true, Fatimid religion was the

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main consolation in his miserable exile in Yumgān, and therefore he loves to speak of this wonderful event. A fine example is the *qaṣīda* which begins with an elegant pun on *shām*, 'evening' and *Shām*, 'Syria'. Drinking from the cup of thinking (which, as we may surmise, makes his head turn) the poet, using the traditional juxtaposition of Byzantines and Abyssinians, that is, light-coloured and blackish, sees the night rising from the east like an army of negroes while in the west the Byzantines, that is the luminous day, disappear in Syria. Are not day and night like Noah's sons, the light-coloured Sem and the dark Ham? The night, however, resembles not only a dark army but also an attractive bride who, despite her black face, is adorned with thousands of glittering ornaments. Or else one might say that the innumerable stars resemble never-sleeping eyes. Or are they perhaps divine tongues that carry messages for the future? To interpret their words correctly one has to open the heart's ear, for only then can one understand from the *lisān al-ḥāl*, the silent eloquence of everything created, what their message may contain.

Usually, Nāṣir thinks, one can tell the true state of a person or a thing from its outward appearance and their behaviour (as he has exemplified in an unassuming little poem about a sour apricot:

Did you hear that once a clever man
saw an apricot thrown in the street?
When he found it sour and without taste
and its pulp was bitter all inside,
he remarked: 'The colour of your face
clearly shows what's hidden in your heart!')

Nevertheless, there are many people whose appearance and words do not tally with their actions. The poet, suffering from them, implores God to rescue him and punish the enemies of faith at Doomsday. But after spending all night in such sad thought he finally sees full of joy that the sun's golden sword cuts off the dark curls of the night – comparable to the Fatimid caliph who refreshed true Islam and who is praised in ever so many high-soaring words in the latter part of the *qaṣīda*.

Last night I sat from nightfall until dawn
and kept a cup of 'thinking' in my hand.
The negro ruler's army rose from East;
Byzantium's king went down in Syria.
These two are like the sons of Noah, look:

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the day like Sem, the night is dark like Ham.

The night put thousand pearls into her hair,
some red, some yellow, scattered some, some strung –
No one saw ever such a bride, whose curls
are full of light, but black her countenance!
The faces of these lights look toward us –
they are like eyes which never know of sleep.
Each one is so to speak a messenger
from God to us; their light: His messages.
Or else, they are the tongues of God, O child,
and future things are hidden in their words.
But no one hears their speech but he who has
intelligently opened his heart's ear!

How can you hear a silent speech as long
as you don't take a journey without feet?
No rebel states: 'I am a rebel, look!'
But all his actions say so without words.
The wine speaks in the hands of stupid folk;
the slave speaks in the sodomite's embrace.
They are sweet dates in speech, but act like thorns –
that is hypocrisy, that is not faith!
And I, one who dislikes such evil acts
am placed in Yungān – how can I fit here?...

Lord of the world! Please grasp my hand to lead
me from this wretched place, this misery!
You are the Ruler, just, for all the world!
You, independent of all How and Where!
Throw out from here those that are telling lies!
Put fiery bridles on their heads on Doomsday!

Thus I kept brooding, as I often did,
from evening until the morning light.
When dawn, with wisdom, breathéd and drew out
from the blue scabbard now its golden sword,
the dust became light like a wise man's mind;
tar-coloured curls were cut off from the earth.
One might well say: as if the Fatimid
drew from the scabbard now the sword of Truth
so that Islam becomes renewed and fresh
by the Imam the son of the Imam. . . .

Similar reasoning permeates a poem in which Nāṣir-i Khusraw takes up the whole imagery of spring as it was developed in the works of the earliest poets of Iran: the spring breeze quickens the dead garden like the

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miracle-working breath of Jesus, who could also make the blind see; the flowers seem to be stars and constellations in the green sphere of the garden, and the meadow looks longingly to the rain cloud just as Zulaykhā, Potiphar's wife, was constantly looking out for her beloved Joseph, whose presence would rejuvenate her. Tulips, which cover the hill slopes in Afghanistan like a carpet in the first days of spring, remind the poet of rosy cheeks while the narcissus looks around with drunken, that is half-closed, eyes. This latter comparison goes back to Abbasid poetry and became so common in Persian that 'narcissus' and 'eye' are interchangeable. To compare the violet to a Christian is rare, for the modest, crooked flower is usually likened to an ascetic in his dark blue frock, who places his head on his knee in meditation or performs his prostration on the prayer rug of the lawn. Nāṣir's comparison is probably based on the 'ascetic' aspect as represented by Christian monks. Finally, the ugly black crow – a bird of the wintery world of matter – has gone; only some crows, looking like lowly black Hindu slaves, are still in the garden.

All these comparisons were used before Nāṣir-i Khusraw, but the following lines bring some novel, typically Fatimid, images. Just as the conqueror of Egypt, 'Amr ibn al-Āṣ, could not withstand 'Alī, winter cannot withstand the victorious spring. For it was 'Amr who associated himself with Mu'āwiya in the battle of Sifn and invented the device that Qur'ans should be placed on the lances of his army to make 'Alī stop the fight in which he otherwise would have been victorious.

In this radiant spring day, the raven also disappears; he resembles, in his black plumage, the Abbasids, the enemies of Fāṭima's children. And the poet feels that spring has come not only to the garden but is arriving also in the realm of faith because the Fatimid Sun has risen to give the world new life.

Spring has come – the air is cool and fresh
and the agéd world is young again!
Dark blue waterponds look now like wine;
meadows, silver-like, are now soft green
and the wind, once winter's banner, turned
fragrant, like perfumed with aloes-wood!
Naked was the helpless willow tree –
it's adorned with earrings and a blouse!
And the desert's cheeks became so fresh,
and the eyes of flower-buds can see!

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All the earth is seeing and alive,
for the spring breeze acts like Jesus' breath!
Gardens look now like the sky: the buds
are the stars; Pleiades, the eglantines.
If the cloud were not like Yūsuf – why
does the meadow look Zulaykhā-like?
Tulips, similar to sweethearts' cheeks
and narcissus like a drunken eye!
Violets have not to fear the snow –
why do they still wear a Christian dress?
Dark became the water, light the air,
dumb the crow – the nightingale speaks now!
All the gardens turned to Paradise,
radiant, just like the houris' face,
and in front of rose and nightingale
stand the crows like blackish Hindu slaves.
Look, the rose-bush with its silver arch
is adorned like an enamelled dome!
Winter is as helpless before spring
as was 'Amr-i 'Aṣ before 'Alī!
Thus the raven was dismissed, as he
was an enemy of Zahrā's house:
from his black frock you could understand
the Abbasid's fraud and treachery!
Now the sun is Fatimid and strong
and it rose to heights out of the depth.
As the sun came to the Mine of Justice
it felt hatred for the icy wind.
Days waxed like true faith and thus the night,
dark like infidelity, decreased.
Hypocrites are equal to the night,
true believers to the radiant day.

For now the just ruler has appeared, and the poet closes his *qaṣīda* with an admonition not to follow blindly the words of those who do not know the right, that is the Fatimid, ruler.

But spring reminds Nāṣir not only of the victory of the true religion but also of resurrection. At the beginning of along *qaṣīda* he sings of Nawrūz, the Persian New Year's Day at the vernal equinox, and describes, again in brilliant images, the garden's glory. There are the black clouds which, looking as terrible as the inhabitants of Hell, weep and thus produce a

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veritable Paradise on earth. Pondering this strange paradox, he then turns to the grass which suddenly appears from the lifeless dust and proves – as the Qur’an had repeatedly stated that humans too will arise at Doomsday. Spring, Nāṣir feels, is Doomsday for the earth which now has to show what is in it (cf. Sura 99), and just as the seed will sprout and reveal its true character thus mankind will be judged according to their thoughts and actions. Is not the garden’s ‘resurrection’ a clear proof for the possibility, nay necessity, of resurrection for human beings as well? And if this were not enough to persuade mankind of the reality of future life and recompense, there is also the word ascribed to the Prophet that ‘this world is the seedbed for the next world’, a saying that has inspired many thinkers and poets, especially among the Sufis.

With his numerous verses devoted to spring Nāṣir stands completely in the tradition of those who, as the Qur’an says, see God’s signs ‘in the horizons and in themselves’ (Sura 41/53), of those who understand at least some of God’s mysterious working by looking into nature where God has placed so many examples. Nāṣir’s untiring repetitions of his central object, that is, to make his contemporaries understand the signs, sounds like a translation of the Qur’anic word: ‘O wish that my people would understand!’ (Sura 36/26)

Pearl raining clouds have turned the ground
 into a heaven now,
 and tulips filled the meads with light
 just like a heaven now.
 The rose bush looks Orion-like
 and all the roses have
 now opened just like brilliant stars
 and glitter ev’rywhere.
 The morning wind heals in the spring
 the suff’ring hills and fields
 from all the wounds caused by the storm
 in cruel winter time.
 And rose twigs which were old and weak,
 hunch-backed and crookéd – see! –
 have turned to youth thanks to the breeze,
 the breath of early spring.
 Nawrūz became for all the world
 a day when one repents,
 for all the bad that winter did

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The gardens now turn young and smile
 for clouds have wept and wept so long
 From fiery clouds, black, and which
 how can the park turn thanks to them
 Did it not sport white snowy hats
 It wears now silk, embroidered cloth,
 The nightingale who worried once
 Sings joyful tunes now in the spring,
 Look here: the buds, fresh and alive,
 to prove that we will too arise
 That is good luck: see what was veiled
 for grass is proof that there will be
 Now, do confess: 'Doomsday will come!'
Nawrūz is Doomsday for the grass
 Look at the plants, how they were dead
 thanks to their seeds! For one will die
 For man, see, knowledge is the seed!
 the evil and the good, will see

is over and dissolved.
 in youthful charm and joy,
 and shed tears over tears;
 like people deep in Hell:
 into a Paradise?
 and garments long and white?
 and gowns in colours fresh!
 about world's poverty –
 of opulence and wealth.
 have risen from the ground
 after the earthly death!
 and hidden in the heart;
 for us a doomsday too!
 Your eye can see the proof:
 that seemed dead in the fields!
 and now they are revived
 when one is without seed!
 And thus the one who knows
 the fruit grown from his works.

But the fate of grass reminds the poet also of something else: every-
 thing in the created world grows and diminishes, waxes and wanes and
 when we chew the grain and fruit with our teeth the grass will stay alive
 in us to be transformed in a strange way to form part and parcel of our
 body, and, in extension, our soul. Thus mankind, after experiencing

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fanā, annihilation, can hope for eternal duration, *baqā*. Immediately a story from Rūmī's *Mathnavī* comes to mind, e.g. the story of the chick-peas, in which Mawlānā Rūmī describes the fate of the pot-herbs which, being 'cooked' in the water of Divine wrath after growing in the sun of His grace, will be eaten by man and become part of his life; they will eventually, according to ancient ideas, turn into semen and then form, in the end, part of man's spiritual life.

While in Mawlānā's poem the idea of the constant upward movement that permeates the entire life in the Universe is emphasized, Nāṣir-i Khusraw seems to dwell more expressedly on the fact that the individual may well die but will continue in the species – a view that was certainly regarded as dangerous in orthodox circles. But the image that everything except God is 'eating and being eaten' was well known in classical Sufi thought, and is taken up also in Iqbāl's verse in our time. In fact, Nāṣir's underlying thought may well be that, the stronger the individual is the better are the chances for its survival – again, an idea eloquently expressed by Iqbāl.

Yes, this world is doubtlessly like grass –
only a few whom you know don't err . . .
For you see, in this world, like the grass
ev'rything grows and then fades away.

Grass is like the grain; we are the flour –
Think about it – This world is the mill.
The mad mill, it wants to gnash us here;
while our teeth annihilate the grass.
But the grass will stay alive in us –
thus we hope to live on after death!

Grass: a messenger for prudent men
who know creatures and Creator well:
Take the grass as father, son! For if
I'm your father, it's your ancestor:
Not eternal and not vanishing –
death and life are meeting in the grass,
Dying as an individual,
living in the species, that is true.
Animal and man grow out of it –
therefore all of us are suffering . . .
Let's prepare then for Eternal Life,
for this place is wretched and debased.

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These descriptions of gardens and grass form a central part of Nāṣir-i Khusraw's poetry not only because he can display in them his amazing rhetorical skill but even more as they enable him to elaborate one of his favourite themes, that of the tree, in ever new variations. May be that the Qur'anic saying of the good word as a good tree (Sura 14:24) has inspired him, or perhaps he was aware of the idea, dear to some Sufis, that man is the fruit of the tree World, for as the tree is created for the sake of the fruit human beings are the goal and end of creation.

In Nāṣir's *qaṣīdas* different aspects of this imagery appear side by side:

Look at the trees replete with leaves and fruits,
whose leaf is talent, and their fruit is knowledge!

Not the human being in general, rather, the wise man appears as the blessed tree at the stream of wisdom, *ḥikmat*, which is a water by which the dead find new life again (147). Logically the process of acquiring knowledge can appear as a tree's growth: the poet sees the tree of his knowledge which grew to sprout leaves, then buds, and now it has reached maturity and brings tasty fruit (248). But there are other trees, not as wholesome and pleasant as that of wisdom, for the world is also a tree which one better not shake because its fruits are grief and sorrow, nothing else (184). Therefore people with insight should understand:

You may think, clever man,
this world's a lovely tree
whose tasty, fragrant fruits
are the intelligent.
But God, the gardener, plants
wise men, and there are too
the stupid, ignorant
like thorns and useless straw! (153)

For besides the trees planted by the Merciful, *ar-raḥmān*, one finds those planted by Satan (444). Do people not see that the trees in God's garden are different, consisting of Muslims and Christians, and some of them bear succulent fruit as do quince trees, others are barren like willows (193)? What strange creatures grow as trees in this garden!

Look with the heart's eye on God's garden –
there you will see
all kinds and sorts of trees, which human beings

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	have rarely known:
One holds a dagger, one some balm, another	a lancet sharp;
one opium and one ambergris, one sugar,	one colocynthes;
one is like birds, high-soaring, and his wing	consists of thought,
and one looks like a scorpion but his sting	is in his mouth;
one rubs his head vaingloriously and proudly	on Saturn high,
one puts his head beneath a stone to hide it	as vipers do;
one's root is virtue, and his leaf is knowledge,	kindness his fruit –
what he may speak, it's wisdom, and his actions	are fine and true;
one's face is unbelief, his hand oppression,	bad thought his foot,
his words and deeds are rotten and his actions	are quite obscure,
one is like water under straw, seducing	with lovely speech,
a branch whose fruits are needles, sharp and piercing,	but silk its leaf.
One says: 'I'm noble, look! My lineage comes	from Arabs pure!'
One says: 'I'm Persian and my ancestor	was King Jamshēd'

Sometimes, the human body appears as a tree, but, as in the case of the tree World, Nāṣir warns the reader:

The body is a tree, its fruit is reason, lies
and ruse are straw and thorns – beware of thorn and straw! (287)

On the other hand, the prudent person resembles a tree whose fruits are pearls and whose leaves are gold pieces for, mind you! knowledge and wisdom are much superior to gold dinars and pearls as they illuminate the heart instead of serving material needs.

Nāṣir-i Khusraw knows that in the beginning the fruit is still hidden, but when the tree is watered by *ta'lim*, authoritative teaching, it becomes visible. But, he asks:

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The apple and the leaf come from a single tree –
why is this one so sweet, and one, like poison, bitter?
How could a man mature who had no pain nor hardship –
How would the rose be fragrant without the wind and rain? (186)

The image of gardens is extended to the Shia concept of the world in which the adversaries of the Prophet's family are regarded as madmen:

In the garden of the Prophet's law
are his family alone the landlords.
To those madmen did the garden's owner
distribute dry leaves alone and straw.
Asses are they, and the ass does not
know the difference of dung and ambra!
Hurry, seek the road that leads you there,
even if it be in China far!

And in this garden of the true religion – which one also may call Paradise – one should look at the figs (mentioned in Sura 95 where man's position between highest possibilities and deepest fall is alluded to).

Nāṣir goes even farther: all of history can be seen under the image of a garden. Thus he dramatically describes the lovely garden that was laid out by God, with doors that are the wise people, the walls made from wisdom, and the protecting thorn hedge is the *Dhū'l-fiqār*. The Creator placed four people and a landlord, the *dihqān*, into this garden (once more the 'fig and olive tree', Sura 95, are conjured up). But alas! a pig, disguised as a sheep, entered this garden, claiming to have fled from a lion. As long as the landlord resided there the pig-sheep grazed in the hill without doing much harm, but as soon as he left the pig uprooted the narcisses and broke the stems of the eglantines; crows and ravens settled in the place of nightingales, and thorns grew instead of odoriferous herbs. The pig, enjoying this situation, produced a whole herd of accursed creatures, and thus the world went on . . . (472-3).

This poem takes us back to Nāṣir-i Khusraw's numerous outcries, either concealed, like here, in strange myths and legends or expressed in clear words, in his repeated statement that he believes in the essentials of Islam, in the Qur'an, the Prophet, Divine Oneness and Unity, in death and resurrection. He also claims to know the Qur'an by heart, which, given the numerous overt and covert allusions to the Holy Writ, is quite likely. What did he do, so he asks the Lord once more in a complaining *qaṣīda*, what

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did he do that the people of Khorasan run away from him as if they were djinnies that are afraid of their master, the mighty prophet-king Solomon? Is he not the same Nāṣir who, in former times, was never called by his proper name (which would be a sign of impolite behaviour in the presence of a high-ranking person)? Rather, he was known as master of literature, *adīb*, and fine etiquette; as ‘scribe’, *dabīr*, that is someone excelling in the art of epistolography and member of the ‘secretarial’ class. Had his writing not been so beautiful, so meaningful that the paper imagined it was no longer ordinary writing material but rather shimmering, soft silk? And while the scribes usually follow the words they think of, in his case the words came to him on their own, captivated by his superior skill. Even more (as he claims with a somewhat tasteless pun, *tajnīs*): when he was well filled, *sīr*, narcisses used to grow from garlic seed, *sīr*; that is, he was able to produce an elegant result from unpleasant and worthless ideas, and his mature intellect was praised when he was still a mere youngster.

And now, after leaving the treacherous world, he preaches only the true faith and what once was water has been transformed into fragrant rose water while his dust exudes fragrance, like ambergris. . . .

I complain to You, All-knowing Lord,
of the people in the realm of Khorasan!
What did I that they deserted me,
family and stranger, all confused?
I believe in the Qur’an, Your word;
never said, You have associates,
but I said correctly that there is
not a helper in Your Being God,
and Your messenger Muhammad brought
faithfully Your message to mankind.
Not Your Prophet did bring the Qur’an –
Gabriel was the ambassador.
I believe in death and resurrection
and in Doomsday, know Your book by heart!
I did not betray them, by my life!
Did not seek an army, crown, or throne!
I’m not Solomon – why, like the djinns,
old and young run all away from me?
I am still that Nāṣir who was once
constantly in noble gatherings!
None called me by name; to honour me

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I was called *adīb* and 'Perfect Scribe'.
Literature, that was my strongest point –
happy was the writing's eye from me,
and my writing art made claim the paper
that it was superior to silk.
Scribal art was like a little child –
my words saturated it with milk!
Scribes are prisoners before their words words –
were prisoners before my skill!
When I was well filled, narcissi bloomed
out of garlic seed, by my good luck!
Full of pride, my friends ascribed to me
an old intellect in a young man.

Now I am superior in knowledge,
straight my nature, and my mind enlightened;
in my soul, thanks to the grace of God,
understanding of the deeper meaning.

In those days, I was deep in a well –
God raised me to the ethereal skies:
the amount of knowledge I possess
is today ten times more than it was.
Bodily, I was famed in the world –
now I'm better, famous for my faith.
I was dust and wind – my dust and water
turned to ambergris and rose oil now!

The *qaṣīda* closes with a lengthy admonition to a Mir, probably the ruler of Badakhshan.

In a similar train of thought, Nāṣir-i Khusraw muses about his exile, applying among other images, that of the 'tree of thought'. His consolation is that his love for the Prophet's family and his unflinching faith have enabled him to endure the stings of the 'scorpion of exile'.

The scorpion of exile, he stung my heart – as if
he found in all the world no one as low as me!
I look into my state, intensely, deeply hurt –
my bile comes up from grief to rise into my head.
I ask: Why did the sky, that cruel, stupid sphere
put me as target up for arrows of the Fate?
If man's high rank depends on perfect virtue – then,
why did this thing make *me* so worthless, so abject?
If Time would turn in tune with someone's virtue, then

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my place were nowhere else but on the lofty moon!

No! Neither Time nor Sphere do know what virtue is –
that's what my father said, when I was still a boy:
'Knowledge is better, son, than household, money, rank!'
Thus spoke to me the one with penetrating mind.

Despite my radiant mind, more splendid than the moon,
the station of the moon is of no use to me.

My faith, my intellect suffice as shield and soldiers
against Fate's cutting sword, against Time's army strong!
Were I a prisoner of wealth, as others are,
my belly would be filled with envy's poisoned food.
But thought is like a tree, that bears much fruit for me –
knowledge and abstinence, they shed much fruit for me!

You need to see me, friend, complete, and without fail?
Then use your inner sight, as wise men look at me.
My body may be frail – don't look! because my word
has greater impact here than yonder starry sky!
Earth is my dwelling place, by night and day, and yet
my journey takes me far above the seventh sphere.

A hospice is the world for those who wander, son!
For me, a place to stay is better than all this.
God guarded me against the needs that humans feel –
I am without a wish here in this passage way.

Thanks be to God who showed the way to His true faith,
to knowledge, to His grace, and opened wide His gate!
And in the world I gained fame like the radiant sun
Because I deeply love the Family of Truth! . . .

Such ideas and expressions occur so frequently in Nāṣir's *Dīvān* that one feels how the poet struggled to persuade himself if not his listeners (for who might have listened to him in the wilderness of Yumgān?) that he indeed had reached the loftiest possible rank, a rank that entails eternal survival because he has devoted himself exclusively to the propagation of love for the Prophet's family.

But there were also times of despair, and one topic that recurs in Nāṣir's *Dīvān* as frequently as it formed part and parcel of early ascetic verse is, to blame the World.

For the world is a thievish game,
from which no man may save

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Himself, be he sultan or subject,
his goods, be he master or slave. (E.G. Browne)

Nāṣir repeats in ever-new variants his complaint that this cruel thing devours everything:

The world will eat those whom she has brought up –
No Hindi can escape her claws, no Sindhi! (607)

Rather, it is a predatory beast:

This world has turned into a wolf, devouring people –
Come, look at it if you do not believe my word!
But as the greedy world is going to devour me,
why should I worry then in vain long for her sake? (377)

These lines are fully enjoyable only in Persian, as ‘to worry’ is expressed with the phrase ‘to eat grief’.

One of Nāṣir’s favorite comparisons in this connection is that of the world, or Fate, with a cat that eats her kittens (95, 394, 519), an image also found, slightly later, in Sanā’ī’s verse, and as the cat’s profession is to devour its own offspring one should rather turn away from her and avoid contact with her (607). But while the comparison with the cat is widespread in literature Nāṣir-i Khusrāw invents another, rather funny image to explain the relation between man and Fate:

See, Fate will swallow you just very gently –
you fool are cheese, look! for the mouse of Time! (219)

The Persian idiom *zhazsh khurdan*, ‘to chew straw’, for useless chatting and meaningless gossip offers Nāṣir another, frequent, comparison:

While this world’s teeth keep on chewing you,
Silly man, you chew the straw of talk! (535)

The world can be seen as an evil dragon (273) or as a sleeping snake, which can easily hurt those who approach it (III).

Like many other, later, poets Nāṣir is also fond of the idea that the turning spheres are an enormous millstone that crushes man’s head (255). But once he continues his comparison of the millstone-like, turquoise-coloured wheel with another image:

It is a rare playmaster, and people are like shadow puppets (387).

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Although this is only a very brief allusion it seems that Nāṣir-i Khusraw may have been the first Persian poet to use this image. The world as shadow plays forms, as is well known, the topic of ‘Aṭṭār’s *Ushturnāma* and appears in Ibn al-Fāriḍ’s *Tā’iyya* as it does in Ibn ‘Arabī’s work, and was used both in Ottoman Turkish and Indo-Muslim poetry to point to the activities of the Great Playmaster who alone knows why He moves the shadowy figures in this or that way – they appear, move, and are taken back into the dark box of unity behind the last veil.

One image of the world seems to, be common to ascetic writers from different religious traditions – that of Mrs World, the *Frau Welt* of medieval German texts, a terrible, stinking old hag (*pīr-i ganda* is Nāṣir’s favourite expression for her). She may appear as a lovely young girl at one moment but once she turns her back to the spectator whom she has just seduced he’ll see her back covered with putrid flesh that houses disgusting vermin. She is a bride who will devour her husband and her children, a prostitute, faithless and mean.

But just as the World appears under different feminine disguises it is also a miserable, unreliable friend: with one hand it lifts you high up to the *minbar* – that is, makes you a successful religious leader – while with the other hand it draws your head to the gallows (184). The contrasting pair of *minbar* and gallows became extremely popular with later poets and was used to juxtapose the role of the stern, law-abiding religious scholar who represents the establishment, and the ecstatic lover who, like Ḥallāj, had to pay with his life for his boundless love. In this form the *minbar*-gallows topos is used to this day in the eastern Islamic lands. It probably had not yet all these implications in Nāṣir’s days, but he also remarks that one has to look at things from different viewpoints and under different forms, for ‘*minbar* and gallows are made of the same wood’ (161).

The manuscript of Time’s ruses can never be complete, as large and wide an inkwell one may use (490), for the old world always remains the same, as often as one may look at it. The only way to tame it is by religion, which closes its mouth with a nail (206). But still, can one at all resist it or escape from it?

Woe! You are like an ant; the sky is like a heavy elephant in must!
 Would any ant be able to withstand an elephant in must? (273)

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One should never be duped by the world's pleasant appearance for:

The world is pleasant when you taste it once:
like sugar and like milk and almonds sweet;
but for the man of reason are its pleasures
like poison when they go down in his throat. (348)

The world is a passing phase, and life is passing too – one should not worry about the difficulties because they are not worse than easy things (289), and long life is really a plague, a pain, for generally man's greed increases with age (312), and it would be better to pass quickly through the world which is nothing but a travellers' inn (cf. 146). It is a vale of tears:

The door of grief – a house full of affliction;
affliction rains from out its walls and doors;
its rubies are the bloody tears of widows,
its royal pearls are from my weeping eyes. (286)

Knowing that, one no longer fears death:

Your body was a shirt but for your soul –
now see its fabric, torn and worn out, look! (134)

In an elegy written in his sixtieth year, that is, about 1063, Nāṣir-i Khusraw accuses this world of treason; but he also accuses himself of having wasted his time and energy in useless pursuits. Why did he not constantly obey God's commands? Until now he has escaped the net, *shast*, of sixty, *shast*, years, as he says with a pun. Is it not high time to send some provisions for the next world? All this running around, all these worldly activities are of no avail; for to reach a better state, obedience and intelligent use of one's rational faculties as well as of one's faith are required. That is the proof, *ḥujjat*, of the poet, Ḥujjat.

O world, you made a covenant with me!
Don't you remember now our covenant?
Why, if I am your child – why did you now
cut off the ties with me as traitors do?
You lowered what you elevated once;
you cut whatever you had bound and tied!
You broke so many ties you had with me –
when did you ever mend a single breach?
You say something and twist it strangely then –
it looks as if you spoke insane and drunk!

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The childhood picture which you once presented –
You washed it off my face with old age's water!
What did I that your way does not fit mine?
As if you'd say: 'My bread brings ignominy!'
Till I matured, your pain did never leave me –
there's no support from you, and no escape.
Yet, though I see from you such nasty harshness
I don't hold back my hand, with all this languor . . .

I strive so that, obeying God's commandments
I'll leave this baseness and climb on your roof!
As I was faithful to God's covenant,
I do not care when *you* break covenants!
Whatever you gave me, you take it back then –
My stupid body! You should know that well!

Your mother's womb was first for you a prison
where you were sitting, bound for long long days.
You thought this was the place where you would stay;
you did not know a better place nor sought it.
You found a world then, radiant and peaceful,
when you jumped out from this dark, narrow cell.
When you were rescued from that narrowness
one heard you crying, crying bitterly,
from fear you might have reached a worse abode –
you did not know: this was a better place.

What is this house in which turn up large armies
a Hindu here, a Sijzi and a Busti? . . .

You're still strong like a twig and swift like game
and still escape the net of sixty years:
you rode the restive horse of 'one should not'
and 'one must not', and trampled on the people,
and now you are afraid to leave this place
and are not satisfied with this much life!

Why did you not obediently worship
the One who made this lofty portico?
Look, what is the result of fifty-nine?
What is the net result now in your hand?
Now, if you have a little shop, why do you
not send provisions for the judgment Day?
Why don't you put aside today some items –
Are you afraid of emptyhandedness?

You gave your heart in demons' hand – Woe! Error!
You acted badly, badly, where you were!
Whom do you suit if you don't suit yourself? . . .

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Your enemy – beware, heart! – is the body
If you don't vanquish it, you vanquish no one! . . .
You have a soul, replete with light, and lofty –
if you'd go only out and leave this evil!
You learn the rational analogy
from our Proof, if you judge by the proof.
Consider well, if you think what may happen:
you are the register for what exists.

When Nāṣir here accuses himself as he accuses the world, then he describes the world's fickleness in more picturesque images in a poem from the *Rawshanāi-nāma*. Now white, now black, playing a different tune every moment, wrapping herself in a multicoloured precious gown she is like a peacock who feeds on human hearts and livers, and is as unmanageable as an unbroken colt with dappled fur whose colour confuses the mind. How could one find out what this world may really be? The kings of ancient Iran have been her prey; she has robbed their crowns, has made rulers disappear and reappear, and while everything in this world is growing old, the world itself stays young and continues to wear out people without ever been worn out.

Nāṣir-i Khusraw refers, in another *qaṣīda*, to the *Shāhnāma* – when one reads it carefully one asks: Where is *Farīdūn* and where is Kayqobād? Where is the noble banner of the Kayanids, and where are Sām-i Nariman and Rustam (405, and often)?

The comparison of Time or the World to a two-coloured horse is common in Persian poetry; whether one can recognize here traces of the ancient Iranian idea that Zurvān, the deity of Time and father of Ahuramazda and Ahriman, was two-coloured, or whether the basis for this idea is simply the regular change between black night and white day – Persian poets follow this description and have elaborated it in varied images.

O world! You are a witch with scent and colour –
now white like Byzantines, now black like negroes,
a coloured puppet, that's what you resemble,
for never, never do you stay the same,
appearing ev'rytime in other colours,
producing constantly new melodies!
You're like a charming, elegant beloved
with fragrant robes and gold-embroidered gown!

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I say: By God! What are you really?
For you are like a restive dappled colt!
For you have trampled under foot my life!
What can we do but being kind to you?
You are a peacock with a thousand hues;
you have no other prey but our livers.
Your prey is Kayqobād and kings like him
and without crowns are many, due to you!
You gave Kaykhusraw's kingdom to his children;
you made great people old, and yet stayed young.
You do not rest; no one has peace from you;
you don't wear out – we are worn out by you!

In another *qaṣīda*, the mirage-like quality of the world is emphasized. Do humans not get confused when looking at this big tent whose ropes are the four elements: fire, water, earth, and wind? The never-resting old crone, this world, whitens man's head, pulls out his teeth, and changes his hair's colour. Indeed, there is no hope to find wine, *sharāb*, from a mirage, *sarāb*, that is, from this treacherous world!

Nāṣir takes up an old Arabic tale, and speaks of the songs which one Da'd sang for his beloved Rabāb, and playing on the pun between the name of the woman and that of the instrument, *rabāb*, he sees the ageing person similar to such a stringed instrument, that is, bleak, and lamenting all day long. Everything, he complains, has been taken away; the hair, once black like a raven's wing, has become white as if washed with milk. How long shall one continue in one's wakeful dreams, like the hare that sleeps with his eyes open? One must protect oneself and shun evil qualities, avarice, and ruses, for the thorn one puts into one's bag will turn into fuel for Hellfire and mercilessly burn the owner. Ready punishment is prepared for the wrongdoers and when one catches the bird that belongs to the poor, the mighty eagle, *'uqāb*, of retribution, *'uqāb*, will soon catch the culprit. How can one expect reward when one behaves like a wolf or a hyaena? Everything bears fruit of its own kind: barley produces barley, the soft-skinned noble ermine brings forth lovely ermine kits. Why do people not fear the approaching Day of Judgment when the sun will rise from the west?

The only salvation from this misery lies in one's attachment to 'Alī, for

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he, surnamed Abū Turāb, 'Father of dust', is so powerful that even the demonic powers turn to dust before the dust of his sandals.

What is the world? It is like a mirage!
Why do you run then after it full speed?
Why were the creatures all deceived by it?
The great and small ones, children, old and young,
because they were perplexed by it, confused
in this big tent that's fastened by four ropes.
If you have not perceived these ropes, then look
at water, fire, and at earth and air!

You have become just like a wick because
you walked around in dim light and in shades!

What made this head – once fresh and green like basil –
turn now into a worn-out shabby thread?
This dirty hag, the world, took carefully
the shining pearls – your teeth – out of your mouth;
she tinged your cornelian-coloured veil
quite carefully with shining golden hues.

How often did you sing, play the *rabāb*,
reciting songs which Da'd sang for Rabāb?
Stop Rabāb's tale! For now you have become
lamenting, bleak, like bowstring and *rabāb*!
Do you not see how greed and avarice
tear you to pieces like swift hunting hounds?

The claws of years have dragged you all the time
in hope of wine or water from mirages!
If you're not drunk, then know! the time has come
to know false shine now from the real wine,
for ev'rything has vanished just like wind:
your healthy body, money, goods, and youth,
and this oppressive world has washed with milk
the raven's wing that grew upon your ears!
You are ashamed now like a bankrupt man
who saw at night a treasure in his dream.

Open your eyes from sleep, from senseless sleep,
and seek yourself and find yourself, my friend!
Run, O you hare, run after the true faith!
The eagle has now risen up to fly! . . .

Act always so that when you will be asked
at any time you'll give the answer right.
If you're afraid lest you be turned to Hell,
don't turn away from God's obedience.

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Don't be an oven! and from ruses' kindling
and avarice's fire guard well your heart!
For once the fire is kindled you will see
that your own face will turn to roasted meat.
Consider what you do in ev'ry wink,
do *not* put straw and thorns into your bag
and keep account of your own body
well if you aver the Day of Reckoning!

Do not sell right and lawful things, my friend,
for sinful ones as do the ignorant!
Don't catch the innocent dervishes' bird:
the eagle of revenge will grasp you soon!
O you who gave to error your heart's reins!
Your body may be well ... your heart's destroyed . . .

Your constant work is, robbing like the wolves,
as if God had not clearly in His speech
informed you of your errors and defects -;
dogs and hyaenas – that's where you belong!
You show the wolf's characteristics
though covering your body with a dress:
Can you find Paradise and recompense
in garments which you stole from some poor man?

Don't act in crooked and left-handed ways,
for then your book will be in your left hand!
If you sow barley, barley is its fruit;
an ermine will give birth to ermine kits.

Don't you foresee some punishment and pain
when you give me much punishment and pain?
Why do you never think of that Great Day
when all relations will be severed, say?
and when for sinners not a single drop
rains from the clouds, except calamity?

Why do you not flee from the devils' hosts
into the fort of Him Who Causes All?
Follow the steed of Gabriel so that
the devil may not catch you stealthily!
Not much time's left until the Sun of God
will raise its head from there, far in the West!

O keep away from uproar, keep away!
Beware! and do not hurry senselessly!
Don't pray behind an evil-minded friend –
A snake may well sleep in the prayer niche!

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Yet, the accursed fiend turns into dust
beneath the sandals of Abū Turāb!

While ‘resurrection’ is often connected in poetical language with spring and the reappearance of fresh green from the ‘lifeless’ dust, autumn reminds the poets of the complete denudation of the world.

One enjoys Nāṣir-i Khusraw’s descriptions best when one knows the cold clear air of the Hindu Kush, which has inspired a description of an early winter day when the hilltops are already covered with snow, as if they were draped with white linen or filled with the fluffy flakes of cotton as if they were a cotton-carder’s hut. The fine striped silk which adorned the hill as long as lovely flowers were blossoming has now turned into a straight white sheet, and the cold wind that comes from the hills barely resembles the zephyr of a spring morning – as little as an old man talking of his youthful adventures can revive the lovely days of yore. . . .

After this melancholy description of early winter, and some further deliberations Nāṣir once more turns to the World, this nasty female, this treacherous slave girl who always acts contrary to what one wants from her, and if she seems to be kind to someone then it is only like a shepherd who carefully tends his flocks when he sees that the lambs are getting fat enough for the butcher’s knife. . . .

Once more the world appeared
clear, open to the eye,
for autumn did unveil
her hidden secrets now.
As testimony for
the rose-twig’s longing see
its crooked, yellow frame,
its naked poverty!
The crow displayed its skills
in rhetorics – the mead
closed now its mouth from song
and from sweet melodies.
The naked rose-twig stands
ashamed before the breeze;
the water of its shame
has carried off its heart.
The mountain seems to be
a mercer’s backpack – look!

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true rulership for to be a king means to give, not to take. (The idea that the king is, in a certain way, the neediest beggar of all, is commonplace in Islamic ascetic writing.) Why do people not remember that this life is impermanent; that the world is like a castle which one enters through the gate of birth and leaves through the gate of death? What is the use of life? Nothing grows for ever. Rather, in the time of increase one should think of the impending decrease. Don't you see that someone who used to be unruly and jumped around like a colt is now so old and decrepit that he has to colour his hair and beard with henna to disguise their white hue?

...

If you are a king, then give!
Do not take from town and land,
for to take from people is
beggary, and not king's work! . . .

Like a castle with two doors
is the world; you're bound in it:
through the gate of life you came,
through the gate of death you'll go.
You were always bound to dust;
you will never part from it.
If you think you would stay here –
what a stupid thought is this!

Can you hope for lasting life
from the spheres, which do not last?
While you're waxing and existing
think of waning and Not-being,
for the world's teeth chew you up –
why do *you* chew idle talk?

Tired like an ox from work,
practice abstinence and faith –
once a colt yet to be trained
you now colour hair and beard!

The only way to overcome this dangerous reliance upon the world is to forget the days of youth and, instead of adorning one's body, to adorn the soul with the silk of wisdom. The fine fabric of speech is made of wisdom. (One thinks here of Farrukhī's famous *qaṣīda* in which he compares his poetry to a fabric spun from soul and mind. One may assume that Nāṣir-i Khusraw knew it as it was composed some decades earlier in the same area where he spent much of his life, in eastern Iran.)

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One should avoid everything that distracts the mind; rather than stay with open eyes and a sleeping heart like the hare, one's heart should be wide awake while one's eyes are closed: Nāṣir probably thinks here of the Prophet's word: 'My eyes sleep but my heart is awake.' That's how the wise man should act, for when wisdom and religion work together, the true believer can easily silence the wisest representatives of rational Greek philosophy.

There was once 'Youth' – you should forget it now
and should embrace the weakness that draws near!
You wrapped your body in fine printed silk –
now wrap your soul in better coloured silk,
and if you need brocade gowns for your soul,
let Wisdom be the warp and woof of speech!

Blindfold your eye from what you should not see,
and let your ear be closed to nonsense talk!
Your heart be wide awake, asleep your eye:
thus prove that you are different from hares!
Be good in speaking, truthful in appearance:
the tongue a soldier, and the eyes like heroes.

Read from your face whatever God has written;
forget whatever wrote the devil's hand!
Seek Wisdom as your spirit's nutriment
a stomach be your heart, an ear your mouth.
Learn Wisdom from religion! Silence then
with a few words Hippocrates the Wise! . . .

Nāṣir's main concern is to teach right speech and right action, for only from action can good fruits grow (one remembers his fondness for similes taken from gardens and trees, see p. 71f.). Therefore man has to be trained in the obedience of the Prophet, for by his unswerving obedience to God the Prophet reached the place where he was only 'two bows' length or closer' (Sura 53/11) from God during his highest experience, that of the night journey.

Later in this *qaṣīda*, Nāṣir-i Khusraw admonishes the reader not to think of God in terms of outward names – one has to understand the mysterious writing on one's face to which allusion was made also in the previous poem. To do so is an art which cannot be learned by studiously reciting the Qur'an but rather through the wise instruction of the spiritual leader, in this case of Nāṣir himself in his role as Ḥujjat.

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Old man! Look, how the youthful sky
has turned upon us many times!
The goblet of the sphere is called
Today, Tomorrow, Yesterday.
Tomorrow has not come, and where
is Yesterday? Today is here!

Fate is an ocean – no one knows
its width, its height, its deepest depth.

Look, what the best is and do that –
so you'll be famed in faith and world.
The best man is who works the best –
a cotton-carder weaves no silk!

The soul has seeds of good and bad –
You find the like much in this world.
An evil that grows from your soul:
a thorn grows from a date palm's pit.
You can take out the thorn if you
are well aware of yonder tree!
Your speech: the fruit; your work: the leaf –
Who listens to this leaf and fruit?
If Reason's water feeds your seed,
your branch grows like the Pleiades high,
your fruit tells of eternal life,
your work of houris' faces bright,
and when your thorn turns into dates
your enemies become all friends.

When water leaves the turpid dust
it rises to the high blue sky!
The vine is dear due to its grapes;
the fruitless willow is disgraced. . . .

Princes, so the poet continues, train cheetahs to chase with them. The Prophet is the prince, the believer the cheetah. The wild beast reaches such a high position because it obeys the prince. This imagery is then extended:

Your prince is God – obey Him well
so that your head may reach the sky.
Our Prophet, through obedience, reached
from Mecca to the 'Two bows' length'.

You say: 'One God, the Merciful,
the Lord of all created things.'
How is it that you mention names?

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Are you a devotee of names?
You do not know but names of Him
because wine's vapour fills your brains.

There is a writing on your face
in God's hand, an enigma great.
O learn this script that you may go
from deepest Hell to Paradise!
As long as you don't study it
your soul sees not the real line!
Obedient, study the Qur'an –
and yet, impatient is your heart.
You'll never understand that script
as much as you may stare at it.

Unlettered people cannot read
the script – I'll show an easy way.
Here is a school for you, but not
in Balkh! Don't seek in Bukhara!

The Lord, He has a treasure house
more precious than Darius' wealth;
He placed the Ḥujjat on this hoard
because his heart is purified,
a jewel box his mind – but nay,
a treasure trove with jewellery,
with talking pearls and fragrant gold!

Like many of his compatriots, Nāṣir-i Khusraw took over stories from the Iranian tradition and liked to put words of wisdom into the mouth of the 'old Magian', the preserver of the secrets of the ancient Zoroastrian religion. The little adage he uses here deals with a theme common to Persian literature and folklore from early times – owls, so it is said, reside happily in ruins and to associate with them means to be led to ruins, not to the rose garden; there, only the nightingale can lead the seeker. As the owl brings misery upon those who entrust themselves to her thus evil people drag their companions into misery by teaching them their bad ways: therefore, to associate with them is dangerous, even fatal. For with good friends, a prison can turn into a – spiritual – garden but the loveliest garden, filled with uncongenial people, turns into an intolerable gaol. This reasoning is, again, common in the Persianate areas but in Nāṣir's case it expresses a very personal experience: his lonely life in Yumgān made him understand this truth very well.

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Therefore the reader should take, this parable ‘as an earring’, for to put on an earring meant to belong to someone: the slave bears an earring, and so does the dervish to show unswerving adherence to his master. Thus, the reader should faithfully embody Nāṣir’s good advice and follow him, the keeper of the treasure of wisdom.

How nicely spoke the old priest of the Magi –
O hang his Word as earring in soul’s ear!
‘Whoever takes the owl as guide and leader
sees nothing but some ruined place with owls!’
Beware, and be not friendly with the lowly
and do not lower, woe! your precious soul!
Keep far away, O brother, from the mean ones
and build your house close to the wise men’s lane!
From good ones you’ll be good, from vile ones, vile;
from low ones, low; from real men, a man.
Cut off your friendship with the ignorant –
if you are dainty, seek the dainty ones.
With clever friends, a prison turns to gardens;
unfitting people turn to gaols a garden!
It’s better that your enemy be clever
than that a stupid one become your friend!
No enmity comes from the knowing people,
but friendship does not work with heedless folk!

Is is not so – thus the poet asks in the *Rawshanā ĩnāma* – that there are different kinds of people:

A group, quite subtle – these are Adam’s children –
but really there are both mean and noble!

One has to differentiate between them, for the ordinary people are indeed worse than animals; they are veritable devils. They look like humans and despite their vileness the whole world is busy with serving them. (Half a century later, Nāṣir’s compatriot Sanā’ī! was to say that ‘not everyone who has a human face is a human being’.) These people are busy with denying the elect and the prophets because they are deprived of heart and soul; they are interested only in the body’s pleasure, in lust and greed, moved exclusively by the base instincts of the *nafs ammāra*, the ‘soul that incites to evil’ (Sura 12/53) and resemble therefore, according to the Qur’an, animals, nay they are even more astray (Sura 7/169) (cf. p. 9). They live in perpetual darkness and cannot find the path to the Truth.

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Among them is a handful, low and mean ones
whom the intelligent call 'Human devils'.
They look like humans but they act like Satan,
much lowlier than donkey, ox and horse!
As to the form, they are alive, but soulless,
and if they have a soul it's not the right one,
and yet, the world turns all around these people,
this handful of confused and ghastly dust!
But no one can discern them in their actions
of fraudulence from the accursed Satan.
They have no soul and thus no living heart –
their only work is to deny the Chosen.

By heart and soul you can distinguish humans
for they result in height and lowliness,
and if the soul is nurtured by the heart
it may well reach eternal happy life. . . .
But he who's fettered by his body's lust . . .
consider him a Satan, nothing else:
Like beasts, he is content with eating, sleeping;
his soul's feet fettered by his nature's chains.
Thus he remains alike to animals
in darkness, mean, and with a turning head.

O strive, my friend, lest you be in this group
in darkness, mean, and with a turning head!

But as bad as ignorance and worldly lust are, selfish pride is equally dangerous for the soul. That becomes clear from the parable of the eagle who boasted of his high soaring flight: the preposterous bird was hit by an arrow and discovered some feathers around the weapon. Still proud in defeat the eagle claimed that only he himself, by means of his own feathers, had been able to cause his own misfortune. The meaning of this story, however, can also be that one has to attribute indeed all one's mishaps to oneself.

One day an eagle rose up from his rock
and, full of greed, spread all his plumage out,
arranged his wings correctly and spoke thus:
'Today the world is all beneath my wings!
If I fly high the sun no longer sees me,
while I see dust specks in the ocean's depth;
and should a gnat be crawling in the dust,
my eye beholds the insect's movements too!'

Thus he showed off, not fearing God's decree –

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What happened to him from the cruel sphere?
For suddenly from out a hiding place
an arrow came, shot from a mighty bow.
The piercing arrow hit the eagle's wing
and cast him from the cloud onto the dust.
He wriggled in the dust just like a fish
and all his plumage fell there left and right.
 'How strange!' said he, 'this thing is steel and wood!
How could it be so swift, so piercing sharp?'
He looked and saw his feathers on the arrow
and screamed: 'From *me* came what came over me!'
 Cast out your ego and your selfishness!
 Look at this eagle, full of selfish pride!

Nāṣir's *Dīvān* is, as he himself rightly claims, a treasure trove of wisdom even though one often feels sorry for the great thinker who had no one to share his lofty thoughts with. The lonely man had time enough to devote himself completely to the deeper and deeper understanding of the revelation, and of the secrets God had laid into the ritual duties of the believer as well as into the words in His Book to whose true understanding the descendants of His prophet were the only reliable guides.

Thus it seems natural that he not only alludes to *ta'wīl*, the esoteric interpretation, in scattered verses (see pp. 29–30) but offers his own interpretation of one of the central rites of Islam, the pilgrimage to Mecca. The readers of Nāṣir-i Khusraw's *Dīvān*, in the first place E.G. Browne, have rightly considered his account of the *ḥajj* a true masterpiece. In an ingenious play on the words used in the ritual, Nāṣir leads his listeners slowly into the secrets of spiritual pilgrimage: when one puts on the *iḥrām*, the garment made of two white unsewn pieces of fabric, one should make prohibited (*tah'rīm*, from the same root as *iḥrām*) for oneself everything except the thought of God. The call of the pilgrims, 'I am at Your service!' (*labbayka*) should remind them of the meeting between God and Moses, the mysterious dialogue of love, and the modern reader may again think of one of Mawlānā Rūmi's stories in the *Mathnavī*, when the despaired man who had abandoned prayer is told by God that his prayer contains in itself the answer to the Divine word 'I am at your service'. The praying humans and the answering Lord are united in a supreme spiritual dialogue. The 'standing' on the plains of 'Arafāt should lead to self-denial and knowledge, '*irfān* (from the same root as '*arafāt*). Is

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not the true pilgrim suspended between hope and fear in this sacred place, thinking of whether he will ever be safe from the temptations which the 'soul inciting to evil' may bring upon him and which will lead him to Hell? Entering the sanctuary he should be trusting and completely out of himself just like the Seven Sleepers who did not know that they had slumbered for 309 years. To cast three times seven pebbles at the place where one stones the accursed Satan means to throw out all one's mean qualities and all unholy customs; and the slaughtering of the sacrificial lamb that is killed in memory of Abraham's sacrifice means, in Nāṣir's and in Sufi interpretation, the slaughtering of the *nafs*, the lower soul, the overcoming of one's worldly wishes and lusts. The place of Abraham should remind the pilgrim of the supreme surrender which Abraham performed by willingly agreeing to sacrifice his son. Only by following his example one can be called a true Muslim. The seven circumambulations around the Kaaba should bring to the pilgrim's mind how the hosts of angels unceasingly circumambulate the Divine Throne while the seven-fold running between Ṣafā and Marwā should free the heart from every thought of the otherworld and teach it *ṣafā*, purity, and *murūwwa*, true virtue (a pun on the names of the two hillocks that was dear to the Sufis). Finally the farewell from Mecca should be like dying because it symbolizes the return from the sacred Presence to the deserts and jungles of daily life. Unless one has not understood these inner aspects of the rites one has as it were not performed the pilgrimage at all.

Now the pilgrims, highly honoured, have returned,
 grateful for the grace of God, the Gracious One.
 Toward Mecca did they come from 'Arāfat
 after shouting: 'At Thy service, oh Great Lord!'
 Tired from the pain and suff'ring in Hijaz,
 saved from painful punishment and burning Hell,
 they completed all the rites of pilgrimage,
 whole and healthy they returned now to their homes.

I went also to receive them for a while,
 stretching forth my foot from out the carpet's rim,
 for I had in midst of yonder caravan
 a dear friend, an honest, truly noble man,
 and I said to him: 'Please tell me, oh my dear,
 how did you survive this journey, full of fear?
 As I shall remain behind you all the time,

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I am all remorse, repentant – but you know
I am grateful that you could perform the task:
there is no one like to you in our world!

Tell me please: how did you honour that high place,
reverently coming to that sacral space?
While intent on putting on the pilgrims' dress,
which intention did you formulate in mind?
Did you make unlawful for yourself, my friend,
ev'rything existing save the Mighty Lord?

'No!' he said.

I said to him: 'And when you cried:
"At Thy service!" glorifying loud the Lord,
did you hear the call of God and did you give
then to Him your answer just as Moses did?'

'No!' he said.

I said to him: 'On 'Arafāt
when you stood and found Him near to you, did you
then deny yourself, aware but of His Truth?'

'No!' he said.

I said to him: 'And when you went
to the sacred place like those "saints of the Cave"
were secured you from the evil of your self,
grieving over punishment of Hell and Fire?'

'No!' he said.

I said to him: 'And when you cast
yonder pebbles at the Satan, the accursed,
did you throw out from yourself in one big move
all your shameful actions and your customs too?'

'No!' he said.

I said to him: 'And when you slayed
finally the lamb to give it to the poor,
did you find yourself then close to God and slayed
there your lower Ego, sacrificing it?'

'No!' he said.

I said to him: 'And when you looked
to the place which Abraham erected there,
did surrender you yourself to God alone
honestly and out of faith and certitude?'

'No!' he said.

I said to him: 'And at the time
when you circumambulated with the crowds,
did you think how angels and the cherubim
circumambulate the mighty Throne of God?'

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'No!' he said.

I said to him: 'And when you run
from Şafā to Marwa then repeatedly,
did you see in sheer lucidity the worlds?
Was your heart free now from Paradise and Hell?'

'No!' he said.

I said to him: 'When you came back,
broke your heart because the Kaaba stayed behind?
Did you make a grave in that place for yourself
so as if you were already dusty bones?'

But he said: 'Whatever you have mentioned now –
I don't know if it's correct or if it's wrong!'

'You did *not* perform the pilgrimage!' I said,
'did not reach the place of self-effacing bliss:
You have gone, have looked at Mecca, and come back,
bought with money only trouble, desert heat!
If you want to do the real pilgrimage
later on – do as I have instructed you!'

Thus says Nāşir-i Khusraw, who himself performed the pilgrimage several times, and a more beautiful expression of the inner meaning of this central rite of Islam can barely be imagined. And in spite of all the tribulations that came upon him, Nāşir confesses that at the end the only true friend and confidant that is left to him is Gratitude for God's kindness:

O Lord, O my Creator high:
I am so grateful for Your grace,
for in old age's days I have
no confidant but 'Thanks for You –'
With piety, obedience,
I sing a hundred thanks to You!

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